MICHAEL O'FLAHERTY

THE UNHEARD 12 MILLION

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME
COUNCIL OF EUROPE
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THE UNHEARD 12 MILLION

The unstoppable voices of Roma and Traveller Women

Michael O'Flaherty
Commissioner for Human Rights

Council of Europe

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Commissioner O'Flaherty engages with women and the kindergarten principal of the Agia Sofia settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece.

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Michael O'Flaherty

WE MUST HOLD OUR OWN GAZE IN THE MIRROR

Throughout the years I have spent working for the protection and promotion of human rights, the voices of Roma and Traveller[1] women and girls I met have resonated with power and clarity.

As I embarked on my journey as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, these encounters once again shape my most powerful memories.

In eastern Slovakia, I met a Roma woman who had been forcibly sterilised.

She told me how this was not just a harm she had suffered a long time ago. It was something that, decades later, continued to devastate her life. She had recently lost her only child, and suddenly found herself alone, facing immense uncertainty and deep insecurity as she aged.

She lives in an informal settlement in Hermanovce, known as the 'settlement on the island', which frequently floods after heavy rain.

She spoke of how, to this day, women have still not received the redress they are entitled to for acts that the state has recognised as disgraceful.

Today, she is still fighting for justice.

She has joined forces with other Roma women who survived forced sterilisations carried out from the 1960s through the early 2000s. Together, and with the support of civil society, they are demanding that the state take responsibility.

Their actions are a powerful example of how Roma women who have suffered such terrible violations resist and claim their rights.

But at the heart of the issue is this: what are society and institutions doing - beyond words - to truly respect, protect and promote their safety and dignity, and to ensure justice?

In Ireland, a Traveller woman welcomed me to the halting site where she lives with her family. Her teenage son was there with his friends, keeping busy, their laughter echoing through the site. She spoke to me about the importance of helping young people find purpose, something to be proud of, amid daily challenges.

It was this mother, along with many others, who later took me to the cemetery where they had organised the unveiling of a memorial for Travellers who had died by suicide.

These were women who came together to confront the unacceptable, shocking rates of suicide among young men and women in the Traveller community, pushing this urgent issue into public debate in Ireland.

From June 2024 and for a full year, I travelled to numerous countries. I was generously welcomed into the lives of many Roma and Traveller women and men, girls and boys. I visited their homes, their neighbourhoods, their settlements and halting sites, and I spoke with Roma and Travellers' rights defenders who drive change across Europe.

I witnessed living conditions I could compare only to ruins I have seen in war zones or in some of the most impoverished corners of the planet.

I saw life without water. Life without electricity.

The deprivation we allow to persist.

It is outrageous that in some areas while infrastructure and funding exist, communities keep slamming into the walls of antigypsyism[2] and lack of opportunities.

I saw the leadership, creativity and courage of Roma and Traveller women and girls. But I also saw the lack of space and political will to hear them and support them. The sexism they face – among many other layers of prejudice and discrimination.

I met Roma families who had buried their children – their lives cut short by bullets shot by the police.

And when I said goodbye, I found myself wondering again: how long until the lives and opportunities, current and future, of each of us, are equally protected and allowed to flourish?

In this one year, I saw something else too:

I saw the fire of collective resistance, the strength of unity and firm solidarity.

I saw flowers blooming through hardened concrete.

I saw human rights defenders risking it all. Stepping in to fill the void left by the state.

But this is far too heavy for a few to carry alone. How long can they endure without a system that truly enables their work, instead of belittling them or merely praising their resilience from afar?

A journalist once asked me why I want to use my voice to amplify and support those of Roma and Travellers.

Because in today's Europe, too many Roma and Travellers continue to face an intolerable plight: that of blatant racism[3] and discrimination, virtually in all areas of life. Too many live in extreme poverty, segregation and exclusion. And too many of us – who have the responsibility to act - are not doing enough.

A child playground in a Traveller halting site in the North of Dublin.

Roma and Travellers are Europe's largest minority.

Across the continent, they number 10 to 12 million. Within the European Union, 6 million.[4]

And the situation in some of their communities is deeply alarming.

Whichever the language of their stories, many of them experience prejudice and violence.

In these pages, we will take a journey together – not always a comfortable one.

We will look at the harsh living conditions faced by many communities across Europe, the impact on their health and access to healthcare, the path to justice and reparation for survivors of forced sterilisation. We will see how barriers to education and employment prevent many from thriving.

We will also address police violence and see the walls that rise up between these communities and justice. We will explore their history – including the Holocaust, still unknown to so many, and celebrate Roma and Traveller arts, culture and languages.

We will touch upon what institutions are doing – and, more importantly, what they are not doing. We will honour those who show up when no one else does – human rights defenders and national institutions for the protection of human rights and equality.

And, at the end of this journey, we will ask ourselves the question: what now? There are a set of actions that must be taken to put in place a framework of protection that is truly there for all.

We must hold our own gaze in the mirror.

Reflect, learn, confront our biases and those of others who cross our path.

Choose to stand against inequality and injustice.

And act - now - using all our means, in support of and solidarity with Roma and Travellers across Europe.

This Roma settlement in the village of Hermanovce in Slovakia is known as the 'settlement on the island'.

TREES CAN FLOURISH ON THIS LAND

When a fitting home is still a wish

Emília made rice this morning. Her three children love it. But the rats attacked the food. She must always remember to hide it under three or four tin pots to protect it, but today she was late.

Emília's house is pieced together from whatever materials her family could recover from the rubbish. In the tiny room where her children sleep, the space is so tight a single person can hardly fit.

'I apologise for the dampness,' she says. 'It rained yesterday, and every time it rains, our place gets flooded.'

Children, despite their difficult conditions laugh, run, and tease each other.

The sky darkens again. Another autumnal storm is brewing, and Emília begins gathering what little she can before seeking shelter in the church.

A brown, stagnant river snakes through the area.

Where the paved road ends, a muddy outpost isolated from the rest of the world begins.

This is not fiction or a distant memory.

This is Europe in the 2020s.

'My dream is…'

I am in a Roma settlement in Jarovnice, Slovakia. From the open door of a shack, stripped of furniture and appliances, the glow of a familiar screen lights up the dark interior.

'My name is Denisa. I go to a school only for Roma children. During COVID-19, the school gave us tablets and internet access,' says a smiling teenage girl, welcoming me into her family's home.

'I really like watching TV series, but here we rarely have electricity or water. Sorry that my clothes aren't clean, and my hair isn't well-combed,' she apologises.

'What is my dream?'

'I would like to have water and electricity at home so that I can finish high school. That's my dream.'

I hear echoes of these dreams and wishes in other settlements I visit. The basics needed – and still missing – for them to freely step into their futures.

It is an outrage that the women and girls I meet feel compelled to apologise.

It is an outrage that our societies and institutions choose to ignore that their families, generation after generation, are pushed into poverty, and deprived of basic needs.

A safe and healthy home – what every child should have without question – remains for far too many Roma children the greatest dream.

Bulldozers, a fire and where next?

'We have a nice view,' a Roma teenager boy says, gazing out over one of Thessaloniki's wealthiest neighbourhoods in Greece. 'But we live among rubbish,' he adds.

We walk across a dirt clearing scattered with makeshift homes, several kilometres away from the city's urban fabric, surrounded by rubble. In the Tsairia settlement, forty Roma families endure these conditions.

A cable starts to smoke, overheated by the fierce summer sun and the piles of flammable debris strewn all around. Refuse collection is inexistent, and waste from other areas is emptied on the settlement.

When you have a safe home, each season carries its own kind of beauty. But when you live exposed in a settlement, every season comes with its trials.

There's no electricity here. Without stable energy supplies, people live in energy poverty.[5]

To get power, even temporarily, they are forced to climb the public utility poles, risking electric shock or a deadly fall. Many tell me that they are also fined for these makeshift connections.

There is no water supply either.

Some residents carry heavy jugs of water. Occasionally, they manage to bring clean water from a nearby dog shelter, thanks to the kindness of its owner.

And yet, right next to the settlement, construction has begun on a 4th generation Technology Park, designed to make Thessaloniki the 'capital of innovation.'

But for the Roma, this is not expected to improve their living conditions.

Instead, bulldozers are a threat to the existence of their homes.

I am told that, one morning, the local authorities arrived without warning and demolished several homes. They planned to clear the entire settlement, without a relocation plan. They were only stopped when the European Court of Human Rights ordered Greece not to evict the families remaining in the settlement.

In neighbouring Bulgaria, against another ruling of the Court, over 200 Roma in the Zaharna Fabrika settlement in Sofia saw their homes demolished in a single day.[6]

Under heavy police watch and the threat of a water cannon, on 15 April 2025, adults and children, the sick and the elderly found themselves sleeping on the streets, without any assistance. In the following days, as their situation grew into an emergency, they faced rejection at every turn: 'You cannot move here – or there.'

The city has since promised a social housing plan, with support from European partners – a long-awaited commitment, now giving hope to the residents.[7]

An aerial view of the Tsairia settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece.

In Istanbul, Türkiye, I hear about Roma families in the wake of the disastrous earthquakes which struck the southeast of the country a few years ago, killing more than 50 000 and leaving several million of the region's inhabitants homeless, according to estimates. 'The earthquake took a toll on our homes too. But people from our communities struggled to get financial aid and container houses', I am told. 'They were also pushed far from aid points.'

Back to Greece, the community in Tsairia is not giving up.

'We called the mayor's office to ask for a meeting, but they keep telling us they are too busy,' a young father says.

Some families have tried to rent homes in the city, but landlords often refuse to rent to Roma.

Others pooled their savings to buy land together in the town of Heraklion Lagkada and set up caravans, but neighbours burned them down overnight.

'I was born here; I served in the army; I pay taxes. Why should my children and I have to suffer so much racism?' he asks – a man who, in the end, had no choice but to return to the settlement.

Many versions of 'home', one and the same demand

I find myself in a place deeply familiar to me: Ireland, my homeland.

A few rays of sun pierce the frozen winter air, as though trying to soften it.

I cross the motorway and turn off onto a side road. Hidden behind walls lies a halting site for Traveller families.

A Traveller man waves me over. With pride, he shows me a beautiful green barrel top wagon, painted with blue, red, and yellow designs. He spent part of his childhood in another wagon, travelling with his family.

'Our life was wonderful,' he says with nostalgia.

Now, this wagon is showcased across Ireland at fairs and other events, where the history of its making and use is shared, to keep it from falling into oblivion.

Once living a nomadic life, moving in carts drawn by horses, Traveller families used to trade in carpets, fabrics, or fruit, and supported local communities and economies with artisanal services.

A wall separates the Avila Park halting site from the neighbouring area in Dublin, Ireland.

However, for many years now, the Trespass legislation and other acts keep curtailing their movement, and – as other communities in Europe faced with such restrictions – now only a few still travel.[8] 'Out of their sight, out of their mind,' they say bitterly. They describe feeling imprisoned in the halting sites where they live today, high walls often separating them from the rest of the town.

I see with my own eyes what they mean.

The caravans are worn down, without electricity, without toilets, without hot water for cooking or bathing. No patch of green in sight, only dangerous rubble where children try to play. There's no space for storage sheds and no place for horses, both central to Traveller culture and economy.

Some halting sites are so overcrowded that families are forced to move wherever they can, tearing apart the strong family networks that Travellers have depended on for generations to survive.

'Slowly but surely, they are trying to break this culture', a Traveller woman says, speaking of the local authority's disregard of her community's claim to live in respect of their traditions.

To many Roma and Travellers across Europe, a basic demand is denied: equality, starting with a safe and secure place, to live in peace and dignity.[9]

A place with hot water, internet, lights that switch on in time for dinner, and a warm bed to sleep in.

That place where, at the end of a long day, you feel at home.

A keyring of their own

Bus 11 links the centre of the city of Košice with the neighbourhood Luník IX, one of Slovakia's largest Roma settlements.

I heard that it is the oldest bus in town, no cleaning services, no controls.

I am also told that about 4,000 people live here in very poor conditions. Most of the buildings lack access to water. The pipes are dangerously old. In those that do have water, it runs for only one or two hours a day and usually only reaches the ground floor.

Caravan: A Traveller halting site in Finglas, North of Dublin, Ireland

I saw how ten or even twenty family members are crammed into 70–90 square metres.

They told me how, when lifts do not work, elderly residents and those with disabilities remain trapped on the upper floors.

Still, I see signs of hope.

NGOs, in partnership with the Roma communities and municipalities, work to improve these dreadful conditions. Microloans, land leases and seminars on construction and financial literacy are part of the programmes run in Luník IX and elsewhere in eastern and central Slovakia.[10]

In other corners of Europe, I find different kinds of efforts.

In Halandri, Greece, the municipality launched an initiative to relocate 156 Roma families from two settlements – one of which was demolished.

The Roma moved into flats in nearby neighbourhoods, supported by the municipality, to give them time to rebuild their lives.

The first months were tough. Racism was rampant.

Some neighbours even collected signatures to evict them – one of many ways in which Roma across Europe are told they are not welcome neighbours.

One Roma woman from Halandri, whose life changed after moving into her new home, says:

'At first, I was afraid to leave the settlement, afraid of the unknown. But as the years passed, everything changed. My children would study for school, and, for the first time, they could invite friends home. I came back from work, rested, and made coffee. As we got to know our neighbours, we built friendships. In a home, you live in peace.'

In Cluj-Napoca, Romania, the Pata-Cluj project funded through the Norway Grants supported the relocation of dozens of families from a segregated, informal settlement near a landfill in the Pata-Rât area to flats within the city.[11] 'Roma community members, social workers, and – crucially – strong political will came together,' says Sheena Keller, social inclusion expert and Roma rights advocate, currently Senior Sector Officer at the EEA and Norway Grants.

But the project did not stop at relocation.

'It continued with psychosocial support, job assistance, and systematic support for children's school participation. Exactly what is needed: a holistic, long-term approach. Were there challenges? Of course. But it stands as a clear example of meaningful inclusion.'

While the needs of the community continue to be urgent, the lives of some families have started to transform.

A family living in the Luník IX neighbourhood of Košice in Slovakia.

Linden trees

Sadly, the Halandri project is now frozen.

The municipality ran out of funds, agencies fell into disagreement, and neighbouring towns pushed back when Roma bought land to set up small homes: 'not in our backyard', was the objection heard by Roma, once again.

Projects like those in Halandri, and those led by NGOs at Luník IX, or supported by funding structures, bring hope and change, but they also reveal gaps and lessons.

Housing remains significantly underfunded, while highly complex and expensive – resulting in slow progress.

And it's not just about how much funding is available, but also *how* it is invested.

Ensuring access to adequate homes and accommodation for entire communities requires more than just bricks and mortar. It demands working together with the communities from the start, intergovernmental cooperation, and technical expertise.

It also includes securing tenure, housing stock and lands in integrated areas, a functioning infrastructure that provides access to essential services, and ways to be able to pay the bills of the cost of living, as well as inclusive education – all shaped in dialogue with all concerned, so that inclusion does not give way to new forms of segregation.

Municipal leadership and solid support, backed by knowledge of the communities' needs, are key.

No link in the chain can be missing.

In Luník IX, the children proudly show me the trees they planted and are nurturing with care. Their linden trees are full of yellow blossoms.

'People think nothing grows here,' they tell me. 'But look, we did it! The trees are growing strong and healthy.'

And they are.

With care and persistence, life finds a way to bloom.

A child stares at the dwellings in the Luník IX neighbourhood of the city of Košice in Slovakia.

OPEN WOUNDS

When health systems fail to guarantee care for all

Before going to the hospital, Marianna concealed her identity with deliberate care.

I am told that she put on her balamo outfits.

For Greek Roma like Marianna, balamos refers to non-Roma Greeks.

To be identified as Roma felt perilous. Such an appearance might mean hours of waiting, dismissive glances, or outright denial of care.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us re-examined our relationship with health – and insisted on equitable access to care.

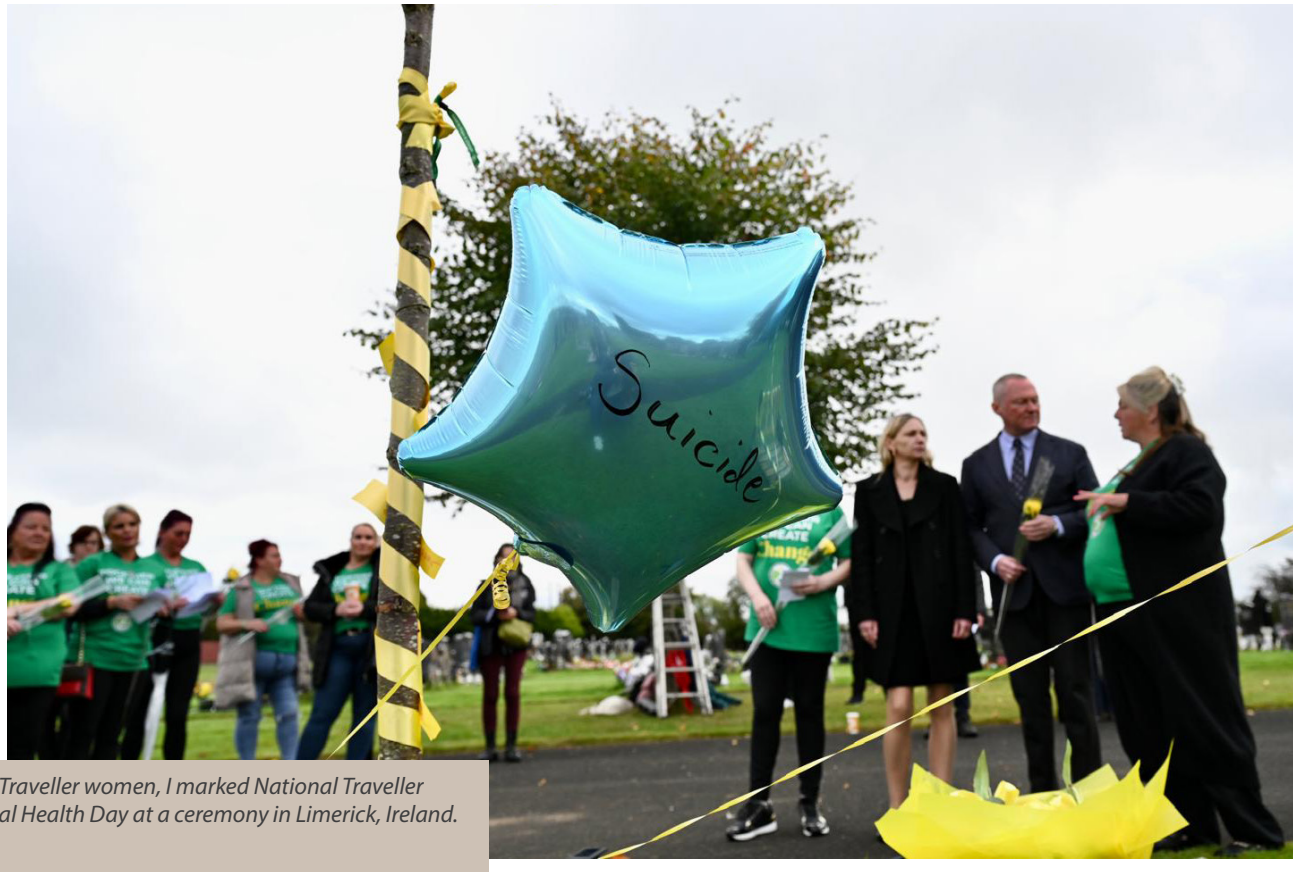
Yet, the pandemic exposed once again with painful clarity the systemic discrimination Roma and Traveller communities face across Europe.

In many countries, they were scapegoated for the health crisis over-policed, and excluded from vital public information and services.[12]

For too many, the right to health[13] still remains out of reach.

For Roma and Traveller women and girls, that distance is immense.[14]

Yet it is these women who, together, despite all the obstacles and discrimination, are leading change in so many of the places I visited.



With Traveller women, I marked National Traveller Mental Health Day at a ceremony in Limerick, Ireland.

Yellow roses

The smell of damp earth fills the air. The sky hangs heavy and grey.

In a cemetery of Limerick, in Ireland, Traveller women gather with bouquets of yellow roses. Yellow, they say, is the colour of suicide awareness and prevention – the colour of hope, for a new beginning.

The crisis[15] is staggering.

Suicide rates among Traveller men are seven times higher than in the general population. For women, five times higher. Suicide accounts for 11% of all Traveller deaths.[16]

I hear that children instead of playing 'doctor' or 'pirates' play 'funeral', carrying around cardboard boxes as coffins. Some graves here belong to children as young as nine.

Why?

The reasons are complex. Poverty, discrimination, poor education outcomes, erasure of cultural identity, and limited access to healthcare, I am told.

'There is an issue with timely and appropriate access to General Practitioners regarding Travellers. What we are seeing is Travellers ending up in crisis stage in the Emergency Department, waiting 12 to 13 hours, and being sent home to receive outpatient appointments 7 or 8 months later', says Patrick Reilly, Mental Health Initiative Co-ordinator in Pavee Point, Traveller and Roma Centre.[17]

'We know mental health services are not adequately funded and there are challenges in accessing appropriate services. Since COVID-19 we know that Traveller mental health has got significantly worse,' he adds.

I meet young Travellers in their twenties and early thirties, afraid to see a doctor – worried a mental health diagnosis could lead to their children being taken away, as they say has happened in past decades.

Patrick McDonagh, a mental health youth worker at Involve, demonstrates the No Shame board game. Dublin, Ireland.

This fear has been passed down from generation to generation.

Travellers are calling for trained mental health responders from within their own community – people they trust, who can recognise the early signs of crisis and offer support.

Because stigma still silences many before they can speak.

And yet, while I witness the toll this crisis has taken, I also meet women rewriting the story.

Twelve Traveller women from the Limerick area started studying mental health and community development at university – determined to return with knowledge their community can trust.

Their journey is rooted in their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic: living in halting sites, often without running water or basic hygiene, they faced neglect from the authorities and rising despair – and many decided to act, refusing to accept abandonment as fate.

'I want to show my children they can make it,' Crystal says. 'That there are better answers than suicide.'

Dangers to one's life

When I visited the settlement of Jarovnice, in eastern Slovakia, the same place where I had heard Roma children's dreams of water and electricity, I saw a wisp of smoke unfurling into the sky.

Fires are a common and deadly hazard in marginalised Roma settlements across Europe, where overcrowding is common and families rely on solid fuel for warmth, cooking, and light - driven by poverty and a lack of access to safe energy sources.

In some Slovak regions, particularly in eastern Slovakia, Roma are more likely to be hospitalised for burn injuries, requiring specialised medical care.

Just days after my visit to Jarovnice, news reached me that a fire had broken out, claiming the life of a woman.

But the dangers to one's life don't end there.

In some places in Europe, settlements are located in areas unfit for living, next to polluted rivers, in flood zones, or on the edges of landfills.[18]

In other areas, Roma communities are excluded from public garbage collection services, exposing them to waste pollution.

North Macedonia's Šuto Orizari, a majority-Roma municipality I visited, is one of those suffering the consequences of such neglect. On 29 April 2025, the Equality Body in the country, found that the City of Skopje had discriminated against the residents of Šuto Orizari by failing to collect their waste.[19]

Air quality meters – which monitor pollution levels and issue safety alerts – have started being installed throughout much of Skopje. But not here.

In fact, for Roma communities, the dangers of polluted environments are only part of the story. Limited access to healthcare – to facilities that society often takes for granted – leaves many unable to get the treatment they need. This deadly duo deepens the health gap and puts their well-being at serious risk.

Women and girls may bear the heaviest burden, with long-term impacts on their health, while they often remain the ones responsible for running households and caring for their families.[20]

In Slovakia and Greece, I was also told that sometimes ambulances refuse to enter settlements or neighbourhoods where Roma live, even for emergencies or situations like childbirth, leaving them to seek medical care on their own.

'You'll never have children again'

In Slovakia, I meet Roma women survivors of forced sterilisation.

One of them tells me this happened in 1988. She had been feeling short of breath and was eventually admitted into a hospital.

I meet with women activists and representatives of Poradňa from Slovakia. Together, these women are demanding justice.

'You'll never have children again', the doctor told her when waking up from anesthesia. Nobody had informed her of the doctor's planned actions.

Tragically, this inhumane practice was systematically applied to Roma women and women with disabilities, in the decades prior, and it continued to reoccur throughout the following years.

For Roma women from Slovakia, and for countless other women across Europe – including in Czechia, Sweden, Norway and Finland – the physical and emotional scars of these violations remain open wounds.

Forced sterilisations are part of a grim legacy of systemic, brutal discrimination, stripping Roma women of their reproductive health and rights, bodily autonomy and agency.[21]

And while nothing can undo the violence they faced, states owe these women truth, justice, reparation, and firm guarantees that such abuses will never happen again.

In both Slovakia and Czechia, survivors have long demanded adequate compensation mechanisms to support them as they age.

Although Czechia has introduced such a scheme, many survivors have been denied compensation due to procedural barriers and failures.[22] Recent court clarifications and an extended deadline - achieved through the relentless efforts of survivors and their defenders - offer a glimmer of hope for justice and redress.

Slovakia, for now, has offered only a public apology and some hope that an initiative is underway.[23] But words alone cannot mend decades of harm. Together, and with support from civil society, Roma women are demanding justice and equal care.

It is time for concrete and meaningful action to address this dark chapter in Europe's recent history.

The fight for equal, quality reproductive care

Many Roma women have been left with deep mistrust of the healthcare system – a system that, in some countries, continues to segregate Roma mothers in maternity wards and denies their equal right to healthcare.

Even today, stigmatising narratives about Roma and Travellers' private and family life continue to be spread – including by some politicians – fuelling their discrimination and exclusion.

Across Europe, I hear accounts of Roma women being treated with indifference or disdain in maternity wards or in other healthcare settings, subjected to verbal abuse, physical mistreatment, or outright denial of care and delays.[24]

In Ireland, academic research has documented how Traveller women were left unattended during labour, subjected to medical procedures without their consent, and faced repeated delays and discrimination in obstetric care.[25]

These aren't isolated cases – they're part of a system where racism and gender-based discrimination intersect, denying women and girls their choices over their own bodies and lives.

The result is an enduring gap in access to care.

One story from Šuto Orizari, North Macedonia, still resonates with me.

I am told that, for several years, not a single gynaecologist served this community. Some have come and gone and never stayed long.

'There were cases where women gave birth in the middle of the street' says Salija Bekjir Halim, Executive Director of the Roma Women's Rights Initiative Šuto Orizari.

In 2012, Roma women and legal experts came together to fight for a women's health clinic in Šuto Orizari. They launched a powerful campaign – gathering signatures, raising awareness nationally and internationally.

Why was there such a crucial medical gap?

'Some doctors simply don't want to work there – and I believe racism plays a role' says Igor Jadrovsky, Member of the Commission for the Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination, North Macedonia's Equality Body.

'I've heard appalling comments from gynaecologists about Roma women' he adds.

Salija Bekjir Halim is the Executive Director of the Roma Women's Rights Initiative of Šuto Orizari, North Macedonia.

Anna Chlebovcová is a Roma health mediator. She works in the paediatric department at J. A. Reiman Hospital in Prešov, Slovakia.

'Another issue is illegal charging in the health care system in North Macedonia. Some gynaecologists demand payment – even for services that should be free or heavily subsidised. Given the socio-economic conditions in Šuto Orizari, many people simply can't afford that. So doctors move their practices to other parts of the city, where they can get away with these extra charges.'

But the women won.

I am told that, today, Šuto Orizari has two state-appointed gynaecologists and a private clinic – because women came together, demanded, and persisted.

Building bridges to care and trust

Today, in Slovakia, at least 300 Roma from local communities work as Health Mediators – and 85% of them are women.

How did this happen? The project, known as 'Healthy Communities', was initiated and implemented by a non-profit organisation in cooperation with partners from the non-governmental, public and private sectors. Since 2017, its activities have been taken over by 'Healthy Regions', a state contributory organisation established by the Slovak Ministry of Health.[26]

Through health mediation, Roma Health Mediators aim at improving the health situation of marginalised Roma communities – raising health awareness, providing support and building trust.[27] They listen to community needs, accompany Roma patients to hospitals and other medical appointments, and help overcome communication gaps with healthcare personnel, ensuring that procedures respect patients' rights and include informed consent.

They help families and older people book online appointments.

They improve children's health literacy.

But perhaps their most powerful role is that of empowerment and role models for the younger generation.

One of the health mediators says:

'The children, especially the teenagers, come and ask me, "Oh, tell me, how can I proceed? I would also like to be a medical assistant. I see you have a better life and I want a better life too"'.

Roma health mediators have become a lifeline for many communities but, one way or another, their shift ends at some point of the day.

The current project period is set to end in 2029.

But discrimination doesn't clock out.

A call for lasting commitment and steps for true change

These initiatives, led by and empowering local communities, are present in various countries and help build healthier communities, enriching the health system as a whole.

They show that when institutions listen, support and place communities at the centre, lasting solutions can be built together.

They could – and should – be adapted and improved for other countries, where needed, and other contexts as well.

After all, it is no coincidence that the very same measures Travellers in Ireland demand to improve their access to quality healthcare echo those that would improve conditions for Roma in Slovakia.

However, many such initiatives improving the lives of Roma and Travellers form part of short-term projects with limited funding periods.

But what happens after that?

Interruptions bring disappointment, break trust, reduce access to care, and worsen health outcomes.

The state responsibility to fix a system riddled with bias and barriers cannot be fulfilled through short-range measures.

Health systems must push forward with structural changes, including with clear guidelines and training for medical personnel, and real tools for patients to report and challenge discrimination and ensure accountability, while ensuring that services are adequately funded to respond to the needs of all.

There is also a need to strengthen the presence of Roma and Traveller mediators among health staff, maintain the continuity of their crucial work, employ them under stable contracts with fair wages, and guarantee that Roma and Travellers have equal opportunities to follow all healthcare careers.

POLYXENI'S HOPE FOR A FIRST SCHOOL TRIP

Ensuring access to quality and inclusive education

In North Macedonia, I heard that some girls are completing high school this year and dream of becoming dentists or psychologists.

They are the top students in their class.

And yet, I am told that they are really anxious about the thought of facing racism at university, as many believe Roma lack potential. They must work twice as hard for people to believe in them.

In Greece, another determined girl, Polyxeni, wants to be the first in her settlement to complete high school.

For girls and others like them, dreams are burdened by the weight of social prejudice and systemic neglect.

A few pages earlier, I introduced you to twelve Traveller women from Limerick who started studying community development and mental health to reclaim their futures.

Crystal is one of them. She looks after her home and family, and at night, when everyone is asleep, she opens a borrowed laptop, uses data from her phone, and studies.

Sometimes, without proper electricity, she reads by candlelight.

'I want to show my children they can make it,' she says. 'I'm studying to inspire and empower them.

The first day at school

Polyxeni lives in Tsairia, a settlement on the outskirts of Thessaloniki where, as mentioned earlier, there's no water and no electricity.

Today, it rains. Polyxeni and other children must walk about 1.5 km through mud and puddles to reach the school bus.

'What child can walk a kilometre and a half through mud and rain? The school bus comes and goes empty. It arrives at 8:30, so the kids miss the first lesson,' says Polyxeni's father. 'I complained to the driver, and he replied, "This is the schedule I get paid for"'.

Without proper infrastructure and reliable public transport, the path to education remains littered with obstacles.

But these are not the only barriers.

After her home at Tsairia settlement was demolished, her family, together with others, moved to Heraklion Lagkada to start a new life.

Polyxeni speaks about her first day at the new primary school:

'The non-Roma parents froze when they saw us. The other children stared. The next day, none of them came to school – nor the day after that, nor the next. I was shocked. The school became a ghost school. For days, only the Roma children attended,' she says.

'They didn't send their kids as a form of protest,' her father adds, bitterly. 'They even called the TV channels. What could they possibly say on camera?'

Drawing the line: A mother's fight, a court's ruling

Non-Roma parents sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to prevent their children from sharing classrooms with Roma peers. Failures of school staff, flaws embedded in the education system, and misuse of rules such as those governing catchment areas are also

Polyxeni is determined to be the first person in the Tsairia settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece, to complete high school.

at play. Residential and school segregation are closely intertwined, reinforcing cycles of inequality.

The result is an entrenched divide, a persistent 'us and them' mindset, where the education of the 'other' is undervalued, and prejudice is passed from one generation to the next.

Seriha Elmazova, a Roma mother from North Macedonia, took this injustice to the European Court of Human Rights.[28] She won – alongside 86 other applicants – setting a precedent in 2023 that could protect thousands of children from segregation in North Macedonia and beyond.

'When people hear the name Elmazova, they should associate it with a brave, strong Romani mother – a woman whose child was subjected to segregation and who had the courage to take the case all the way to the European Court of Human Rights,' says Senada Sali, human rights lawyer and Legal Director of the European Roma Rights Centre.

In Bitola, in the area where Elmazova and her children lived, there were two schools, belonging to the same catchment area. One was attended mostly by Roma students, while the other mainly consisted of Macedonian pupils.

In Štip, the second city involved, Roma and non-Roma children attended the same school building – but they were placed in separate classes. The space was shared, but segregation persisted within it.

The Court ruled that, despite no discriminatory intent, the reality on the ground – which results in primary

school Roma pupils being educated in different schools and classes from ethnic Macedonians – was not justified and amounted to educational segregation.

After the ruling, the authorities in North Macedonia changed the law on primary education to minimise separation between children of different ethnic backgrounds. But concerns still remain as to whether the measures will be sufficient to tackle and prevent segregation across the country.[29]

The practice of segregation continues, in subtler forms, in Bitola and Štip, but also in other municipalities where Roma live.

'Even today, some non-Roma parents use false addresses to keep their children apart from Roma classmates,' Senada Sali warns. 'The state has a duty to engage with those parents too.'

How prejudice shapes a child's future

Prejudice may also mean that children's individual needs and abilities are ignored or wrongly assessed, leaving them without the support they may need and segregating them from their peers.[30]

In Slovakia, I meet Roma mothers whose children are steered on to separate educational paths due to deep-seated bias.[31] One mother from Hermanovce tells me how - with the support of the NGO Poradňa - she fought against her daughter being in a special class for children considered as having 'mild intellectual disabilities'.[32] But what her daughter lost during those years is irretrievable: the opportunities to forge, from the beginning, her own future, as she dreamt it.

These battles are more than individual cases - they are a rallying cry for justice and for confronting the systemic discrimination that continues to marginalise Roma children.

The same story plays out in other countries, where tests, though designed to support learning, are too often used to justify exclusion and segregation.[33]

'How can there be so much resistance?' the woman wonders. 'All we ask is for our children to receive quality education as everyone else. We were denied it as girls, and we won't let that continue. Only then can they live better lives than we did.'

Despite the multiple causes of segregation, authorities have a duty to act – not just by treating the symptoms, but by dismantling the structural causes that sustain division.

Segregated schools tend to deliver lower-quality education and face higher dropout rates. They rarely offer the resources, expectations or ambition needed for children to thrive. The result is a vicious

These children live in the Stará Tehelňa neighbourhood in Prešov, SIovakia.

cycle: poor quality fuels avoidance, and avoidance deepens segregation. Meanwhile, the children inside are stigmatised and left behind.

'I've met Romani people – now adults with families – who went through segregated schooling and still cannot write their own name. But the damage goes even further. It becomes intergenerational. If you've never had access to quality education, how can you support your children when they go to school?', Senada Sali says.

'And perhaps the biggest loss – the most profound – is the absence of interethnic learning. We live in multi-ethnic societies. That cannot be undone. You can't suddenly decide, "Let's all study separately." It doesn't reflect the reality of our lives', she adds.

Desegregation takes time and trust. Until inclusion is fully realised, quality education must be guaranteed for every child - delivered by qualified, motivated teachers and supported with the resources and vision needed to make their education meaningful, wherever they learn.[34]

Inclusive education bears lasting fruits. It must be guaranteed to all children, so that they can learn and grow side by side as equals, from the start.

Nobody called my mum to say 'Come back to us'

In Spain, only 0.8% of young Roma students graduate from university. Carmen is among that rare few. In June 2025, she graduated in Early Childhood Education - a milestone hard-won against the tide of adversity. Roma students drop out of education with almost no one to support them to continue, she says at her graduation speech.[35]

In Helsinki, I hear echoes of shattered dreams – futures bent and broken by a single, careless sentence shaped by prejudice.

'University is not for Roma. Roma do other jobs,' a teacher once told a young Finnish Roma student. 'I was just a kid, and I believed her,' he told me.

These words have a profound impact, transforming potential into silence and ambition into shame.

Stereotypes cloud a teacher's judgement, locking children into cycles of exclusion.

In Ireland, Irish Traveller Patrick Reilly shares his experience in school: 'I did well in primary school, but in secondary, dear me, I struggled. I needed support, but I didn't have it, and I didn't have the confidence to ask. Halfway through, I dropped out. Nobody ever called my mother to ask, 'Why did he leave?' Nobody said, "Patrick, you should come back to school." Nothing.'

Reilly now draws from his own experience to serve as Mental Health Initiative Co-ordinator in Pavee Point, Traveller and Roma Centre.

The problem is systemic.

A sociologist I met while in Ireland told me that most teachers have no expectations for Traveller children. She works with kids aged 10 and 14 who can't even write their own names, because while their classmates are preparing for university, they get homework to draw pictures.

Reduced timetables, which are intended as a temporary support measure for children facing specific challenges, have become a trap for Traveller children. When such timetables are used, pupils will start the school day later than usual, or finish it earlier, or may not attend the full five-day school week, often over extended periods. They are often applied even for entire school years, cutting Traveller children off from their peers and severely limiting their future opportunities.[36]

Language is another serious challenge. Traveller children in Ireland are often deprived of education in the Irish language, despite it being a key requirement for some careers, including that of primary school teacher.[37]

The consequences of these experiences are stark: while only 1% of non-Traveller children leave school before the age of 13, the figure for Traveller children is 28%.[38]

A gap that feeds illiteracy, deepens marginalisation, and builds a lifetime of barriers – which is transmitted to the next generation.

Another missing piece: respect and visibility of one's identity

As Alina Șerban, Romanian Roma actress, filmmaker and ARTivist, notes: 'Education alone isn't enough if schools remain spaces of discrimination. We need Roma teachers, inclusive curricula, and support systems that reflect and uplift our identity, not erase it'.

'There was nothing in school that represented my way of life, my ethnicity. And if Travellers were mentioned, it was always in a negative context. I felt excluded in school. And I wasn't the only one.' Patrick Reilly says.

'If we had days dedicated to cultural exchange,' Reilly adds, 'maybe I wouldn't have dropped out.'

Another piece is too often overlooked: respect for the nomadic way of life. For some Roma and Traveller children, this shapes their world – and education must find ways to honour, not erase it.

I also remember a young Roma man from Portugal who spoke about his language, Romani, being lost as a result of historical persecution and assimilation policies.[39]

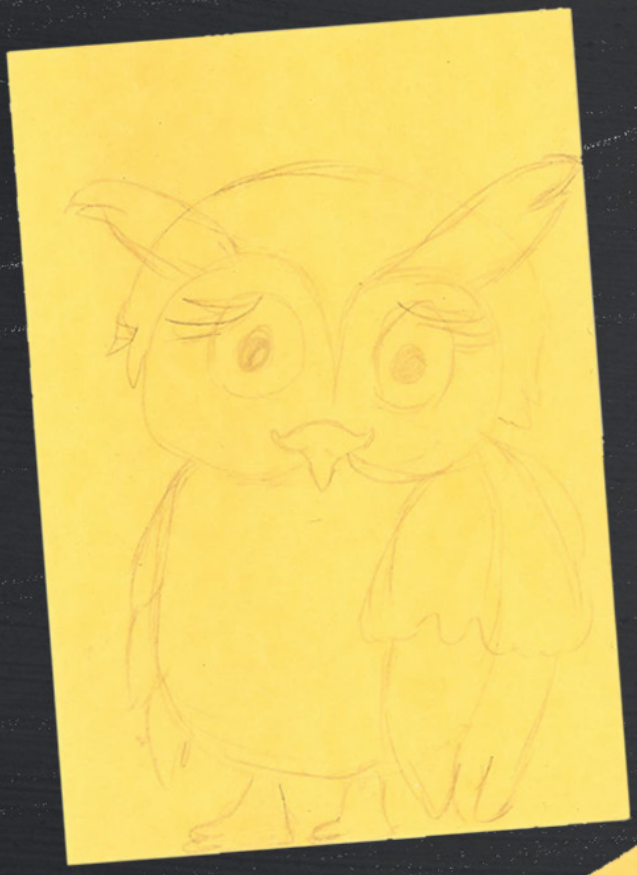
Minority language education is more than words on a page; it is a connection to culture, history, and a sense of belonging.

The more languages a child learns, the greater the foundation for societal inclusion and cohesion - built on the acceptance and celebration of diversity.[40]

Teaching history, too, holds quiet power – the power to unravel prejudice.

As we will explore in the pages that follow, to confront discrimination against Roma and Travellers, their stories must be told. Recognising, understanding, and remembering their history as part of our shared memory can begin to replace myth and mistrust with respect and inclusion.

"In secondary school, I needed support, but I didn't have it", says Irish Traveller Patrick Reilly, Mental Health Initiative Co-ordinator at Pavee Point, Traveller and Roma Centre in Dublin, Ireland.




3A BAC

These children's drawings were given to me during my visit to the daycare centre for children living on the streets in Kisela Voda, North Macedonia.

Girls left behind

Girls face even greater obstacles to their education.

'The main problem is poverty,' says Salija Bekjir Halim, Executive Director of the Roma Women's Rights Initiative Šuto Orizari. 'Parents go to work, and girls are forced to drop out to care for younger siblings, because there is no state support.'

Patriarchal structures and beliefs worsen the situation. Just like many other women - no matter which community they belong to or country they are from – 'we grow up being told that a girl's place is in the home,' Bekjir Halim adds.

In situations of deep socio-economic marginalisation, cases of early marriage may be the result of a response to the intersection of poverty and patriarchy – a way to survive in the absence of support.

I walk through the streets of Skopje.

I see children begging.

Their families pushed to the margins, living in extreme poverty, where hunger bites and futures blur in the cold.

Many of them are Roma girls.

In Greece, they are called 'children of the traffic lights' – begging at intersections for as long as the red light lasts, their small hands pressed against windscreens, their faces flickering in the red glow of brake lights.

Some of them lack civil registration and identity documents. This puts them at risk and deprives them of legal protection and opportunity.

Child living in the Tsairia settlement, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Instead of waking each morning to get ready for another school day, they wake to another day of exclusion – trapped in cycles of poverty, invisibility, and lost potential – and exposure to exploitation.[41]

There are three daycare centres in North Macedonia which offer these children - for six or seven hours each day - the possibility to hold pencils, to sing, and provide them with experiences every child should be able to have.

I visit one of them. The children rush to greet and hug me, their faces bright with possibility. They hand me crayon drawings. They sing a song about peace.

But each of these three centres can only provide care to 16 children.

In North Macedonia, there are about 400 such children.

These centres are a temporary lifeline – not a solution. True inclusion means ensuring children are no longer forced to survive on the fringes but welcomed into mainstream classrooms and given the support to remain.

Only then can children return to where they belong: to playing, to friendships, to learning. To childhood.

Starting early

Access to quality early childhood education and care can help them exit the cycle of poverty and exclusion and end the transmission from one generation to the next. This early foundation is crucial – not only to unlock a child's full potential, but to dismantle the risk of segregation that shadows their path.

It is a way to offer belonging, and to root each child in the social fabric with hope and possibility.

In Slovakia, compulsory preschool for all children from the age of five[42] is seen as a positive step – increasing preschool attendance among Roma children, alongside more kindergarten capacity.

Change often also begins in the details – in local efforts that place trust in the community itself.

One such initiative stayed with me: the Omama programme, a grassroots approach shaped by care and connection, run by the NGO Cesta von ('Way out').[43]

Omamas are Roma women from the community who act as grandmothers and early educators. They support young mothers and guide children living in poverty through their first steps in learning – building with blocks, holding pencils, painting, and reading books together.

They regularly visit families, becoming a stable, trusted presence – a bridge between the home and the classroom. Speaking to the children in Slovak, they nurture key skills for kindergarten readiness.

These community-led initiatives offer grounded, trust-based solutions that often reach where institutions fail to.

Creating bridges

Across Europe, school mediators and teaching assistants dedicated to supporting students from national minorities are making a tangible difference. By engaging closely with families, schools, children, and public institutions, they help close gaps, remove barriers, and build lasting connections and trust.

In North Macedonia, I came across one such model.

Dzengis Berisha studied law but chose a different path: he became an educational mediator.

'After university, I realised my community needed to know its rights, to claim its right to education, to go to school. That became my purpose,' he says.

Dzengis Berisha is an educational mediator. He works in the Municipality of Prilep, North Macedonia.

Educational mediators like Dzengis are trusted figures from within the community, fluent in both Romani and the institutional language of schools and state administration.

They accompany parents to meetings, help with paperwork, and visit the families of children who miss school – encouraging their return, both in primary and secondary school. I am told that they do not have sufficient time, or sometimes the necessary training, to support pupils in their studies, even though this could prevent dropouts.

'In my municipality, we are three mediators for five primary schools. We are three for 1,500 Roma children. There aren't enough of us to meet the demand, but I hope the Ministry of Education will hire more and secure our role with long term contracts', he says.

Indeed, ensuring inclusion in education is a long-term vision, not a one- or two-year project. It demands sustained investment, positive measures, and financial support, such as scholarships, to bridge existing gaps.

In North Macedonia, these initiatives have proven crucial in empowering Roma children and youth to pursue and continue their education.

A school trip we still owe them

Education demands a holistic approach.

Without electricity, there is no light to read by. Without water, a child cannot bathe regularly. Without jobs, parents cannot buy books.

Without political will, adequate policies and investment, there is no equality in access to quality education.

The solutions are clear: inclusive classrooms, early and quality support adapted to each child. A mixed and motivating environment. A safe space where all children can feel that their stories matter and with teachers that believe in their worth.

These are not radical ideas.

School is not just about knowledge – it is friendships, and early bonds of belonging, the foundation upon which children build their place in the world.

I will never forget the words of teenage Polyxeni:

'I've never been on a school trip because I'm scared. I'm scared to be on a bus with some kids. I'm scared they might hurt me because I'm Roma.'

All children deserve better than this. And when the framework and environment are supportive, children can become their brightest, truest selves – and have no fear to live.

Children play in the Tsairia settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Lorenza Schwartz, member of the Finnish Roma Association, Helsinki, Finland, with whom I met during my visit to Finland.

SOFIA HAS A NEW DREAM

But how to access the job market?

In the colours and textures of cosmetics, Sofia found herself.

After graduating, she began working as a beautician for a large cosmetics company in Helsinki. Her colleagues adored her. They considered her the most skilled, the most dependable.

Everything was going perfectly – as long as her own identity remained carefully concealed.

From time to time, Roma women would walk into the store. Before anyone could see what they wanted, panic would spread among the staff, Sofia says.

'Press the security button! Call the guards!'

Sofia felt a mix of fury and pain. She thought to herself: What did she ever do to you? She's not here to harm anyone. She just wants to smell the perfumes.

One day, Sofia gave up her dream in order to protect her mental health.

'Once they find out you're Roma, that's all they see – like an "R" stamped on your forehead,' she says. 'A Roma name, a skirt, and you have the door closed in your face. Then young people start to question themselves and their skills, and often give up on their dreams.'

Throughout this journey, I met women who come from different countries, different generations – some Roma, some Travellers – but their experiences echo each other with striking familiarity.

This is not a coincidence. It is the shape of something systemic: the violence of racism and discrimination ingrained in our societies and many recruiters.

The glass ceiling

Technological developments and wider socioeconomic changes in the post-war period put an increased strain on Irish Travellers' traditional economic base. Through training programmes, the state took initiatives for Travellers' inclusion in the formal labour market. And yet, the 2022 census painted a stark picture: 61% unemployment among Travellers, compared to 8% in the general population.[44]

Time and again, surveys show the pattern of sidelining and discrimination faced by Irish Travellers: in 2020, 70% of those surveyed felt discriminated against when looking for work in the previous five years.[45] In 2022, 67% of surveyed groups said that Traveller identity is a disadvantage in hiring.[46]

In Finland, a revealing social experiment shook the public conversation in 2018, Sofia says.

Four high-profile professionals, each with an impressive CV, submitted 54 job applications to employers with open positions. The only difference? Their names were swapped for distinctly Roma names.

The result?

Not a single interview.[47]

Zero opportunities to be seen – because of one name and a thousand prejudices.

The experiment was part of a campaign to raise awareness about the daily discrimination Roma face when looking for a job. It sparked widespread debate, and some major employers have begun to implement anonymous CV policies.

But what four fictional applicants experienced over the course of a few hours is the lived, relentless reality for many Roma and Travellers.

'Even if you have the degrees, the skills – the message is clear: "You need to overcome your identity,"' says Carmen Gheorghe, President of E-Romnja, an organisation advancing the human rights of Roma women and girls in Romania.[48]

'We have education, expertise. And still – no matter how far you go, there's a glass ceiling they won't let you break. The higher you climb, the louder the doors slam shut.'

Interlocking grounds for exclusion

Across Europe, Roma and Travellers inform me that they feel compelled to change their names on their CVs in order to hide their identity. Providing an address known for being an area inhabited by Roma and Traveller communities may also be synonymous with failure. Others are rejected the moment they turn on their camera in a video interview or begin to speak, on the basis of their accent[49].

For women, gender bias in society makes it very hard to access the labour market and work toward financial independence.[50]

How can they juggle childcare and housework – societal expectations rooted in patriarchal norms - and still strive for their economic empowerment?

For many, the situation worsens when their skin colour, migration background or sexual orientation or gender identity – or a combination of these – are met with intolerance.[51]

Biases, majority privilege and power find a myriad interlocking excuses to single out and exclude.

In the shadows

The Roma and Traveller workforce often remains in the shadows.

To survive, some are pushed into the informal economy – without contracts, without insurance. Without protection from abuse or exploitation. Others have no other option but to work part-time, do seasonal work, or accept underpaid roles.[52] But what does a lack of access to paid work and financial precarity really mean?

Woman from Halandri, Greece, selling chicory and garlic near a farmers' market.

In some countries, it means going without a doctor when you need one.

It may mean living without electricity or running water.

It means not being able to confront today's costs of living,[53] or leaving one's home country to seek a better future elsewhere.

For some women, it means financial dependence and, in some cases, having no way to leave a violent home.

It may also mean missing out on education.

And the cycle repeats – one generation after another, still trying to find a way out.

Let me share with you some of their stories, marked by resilience, resistance and empowerment.

The hope of a better life

In a small shack in Halandri, Greece, birds sing.

There, I meet women who survive by informally selling just a few things, such as chicory and garlic, near the farmers' markets. They live in fear of arrest, earning only a few euros.

One says she used to work as a cleaner, but her contract was recently terminated.

Another says she cannot read or write, so no one will hire her.

Her grandchildren go to school, but they have no lights to read by. She does not want them to repeat the hard life she had to live.

I heard of dreams to live in houses, but how can they pay the rent, electricity, and water bills, when their means are so limited?

In Finland and Ireland, I met Roma who left their home countries - Romania, Bulgaria, Czechia - often driven by poverty and the hope of a better life.

'When I had nowhere to lay my head anymore, I took my children to sleep at my sister's and left. We had to separate', Iuliana says.

She is originally from Romania and now lives in Finland.

In Helsinki, life on the streets was harsh and uncertain.

But things began to change when the Hirundo Day Centre at the Deaconess Foundation provided her with the opportunity to work.

Today, Iuliana works in the Foundation's bakery.

Though the distance from her children weighs heavily, much is at stake: 'I miss their love – but if I leave Finland and lose this job, all my life will be destroyed.'

Iuliana Baldovin, a native of Romania living in Finland, works at the Communion Bread Bakery of the Helsinki Deaconess Foundation and previously worked at the Hirundo Day Centre.

Scrap collectors and the green economy

At 6:30 am, a Roma man searches for old washing machines and fridges discarded by the bins across the streets of a Greek town.

From his van, a loudspeaker calls out:

'Scrap collector! I'll take your old appliances!'

'Life as a scrap collector is hard,' he says. 'In summer, I drive for hours and might come back with nothing. That's why I start at dawn – if someone gets there first, there's nothing left.'

'They don't give us permits to sell at markets. No one hires us. Even now, I could be arrested for this.'

Why?

'They say the loudspeaker disturbs the peace. Once, I picked up a washing machine from the trash and got accused of theft. Every day, I fear arrest.'

Some may accuse him of breaking the law. But he's just trying to survive.

The story of this man reveals not a personal failure – but structural injustice.

Weeks later in Šuto Orizari, North Macedonia, I see what's possible when things are done differently – when Roma are given the tools to shape their own livelihoods.

Asib Zekir, Executive Director of the Roma Economic Development Initiative (REDI)[54] – North Macedonia,

A Roma waste collector and employee of REDI Recycling in Skopje, a social enterprise that recycles secondary raw materials using a circular economy approach.

recalls seeing an elderly woman dragging a cart of recyclables. He stopped to help.

"'I'm used to it", she said. That's when I knew something had to change.'

Informal waste collectors contribute to the green economy but remain invisible: they have no contracts, no insurance, no recognition.

Now, REDI Recycling is changing that. They hire collectors, give them electric tricycles, formalise their work, and provide a pathway to the recognition of their rights dignity and visibility – as for any other worker.

Even in times of crisis

The spirit of collective action aimed at empowering communities extends across borders – even into the heart of crisis.

Economic empowerment and financial independence of Roma women and girls is a priority of Voice of Romni, a Roma-led organisation based in Ukraine.[55]

'When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started in 2022, our activities took on new meaning. We are trying to help displaced Roma women acquire new skills,' Anzhelika Bielova, the founder and President of Voice of Romni, explains.

Among others, the organisation supports Ukrainian Roma women in finding a job during the war, it offers vocational training, starter kits to access the labour market, and small grants tailored to their needs.

'In July 2025, we opened beauty co-working spaces called "Romnja beauty space" in two cities of Ukraine. Women who have completed our training can work there and thrive, while their children, as well as those of the clients, are looked after by babysitters', Bielova adds.

'These are more than just beauty salons. They are spaces of solidarity and support.'

And the good effects of their trainings extend beyond borders. 'One Roma woman arrived with her family seeking humanitarian aid. She joined a training seminar in nail cosmetics, received tools and funding. Today, she's building a new life in Germany, earning her own living,' Bielova says.

The regional team of Voice of Romni inaugurates a social beauty coworking space, supported by CARE Ukraine, in Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk region.

Change takes time but it is possible

Back in Finland, Sofia speaks about a case that struck a nerve – a moment when visibility met resistance – and prompted a response by the state's human rights protection machinery.

Two young Roma women had recently graduated from hairdressing school and found jobs at a large chain. When they were recruited, it was agreed that they could wear their traditional Roma skirts suitable for working.

But the women were fired just a few weeks later.

They were told that their traditional dress did not align with the chain's image, and later, their former employer cited occupational health and safety concerns over the skirts.

The case was taken to court by Finland's Non-Discrimination Ombudsman – and the women won.[56]

'It's a landmark case for the Roma community,' says Kristina Stenman, the former Non-Discrimination Ombudsman. 'Especially for young people who want to practice the profession they studied.'

It is the first case in Finland to address workplace discrimination against Roma.

Bias is not immovable. A shift is underway – in the private sector too, where resistance has long been strongest.

In Slovakia, the NGO People in Peril collaborates with leading employers to offer Roma stable employment and career development, while addressing stereotypes.[57]

In Spain, Fundación Secretariado Gitano has worked for over 25 years to include Roma in the mainstream labour market. It took time – years of EU and national funding and persistent collaboration with Roma communities, local governments, and private companies.[58]

Today, the Acceder programme[59] stands as a testament to that perseverance - a comprehensive pathway to employment that combines targeted training, self-employment support, and strategic partnerships with public services and major companies. And as a clear reminder: sustained effort and collaboration can turn vision into reality.

'There's still work to do. But it's worth it. This is the right path. People have jobs, independence, dignity – and they live their culture, as Roma', Bélen Sánchez-Rubio, head of the international department at Fundación Secretariado Gitano says.

'But access to opportunities doesn't happen on its own, especially for Roma women, who often face multiple barriers. There is a need to create tailored, women-specific support structures, and to meet women where they are, supporting them to take the first steps toward independence', Sánchez-Rubio adds.

In North Macedonia, I meet Roma women who serve in public offices, or work at the local shops – change is slowly happening.

'It wasn't us holding ourselves back – it was the stigma toward us,' a Roma woman tells me.

'Now they see us. They talk to us. We greet each other. Things can change when there is will to make it happen.'

Sofia's new path

Today, Sofia works to empower Roma youth. She helps young people build their CVs, prepare for interviews, look for jobs, navigate the complexity of bureaucracy and understand their rights.

So that the next generation can become a visible part of society.

So that no Roma or Traveller has to hide who they are just to keep the job they earned.

So they can become who they dream of being, without having to constantly fight to prove their worth.

But for dreams to thrive, societies need to change, and institutions must do their part.

'It's not enough to celebrate one or two success stories. We need structural change. We need to break the cycle of exclusion and offer real support', Alina Șerban, Romanian Roma actress, filmmaker and ARTivist, says.

'I dream of a world where a Roma girl can dream of being an artist, a leader — and not have to overcome ten times more just to get half as far,' Șerban adds.

Alina Șerban is a Romanian Roma actress, filmmaker and ARTivist.

BULLETS, FEAR AND JUSTICE DENIED

Overpoliced and underprotected

News agencies report that, in the quiet hours of 22 October 2021, Nikos Sampanis, an 18-year-old from Aspropyrgos, was shot dead by the police during a car chase.

More than 45 bullets were fired, the news said, by seven police officers towards a car, allegedly stolen, with three unarmed Roma teenagers inside.[60]

Several years down the line, investigations are ongoing. I am informed that, in Greece, failure to stop at a checkpoint carries a fine and temporary suspension of licence and registration.

So why did it cost a young man his life?

An aerial view of Halandri, Athens, Greece. I met with members of the memories of a police raid.

Targeted for your roots

Being pursued for your ethnicity, rather than your actions, is a distinct and dangerous form of racial discrimination – one that must be explicitly outlawed.[61]

Across Europe, racial bias continues to influence policing practices – openly or covertly, and sometimes in violent ways. From stigmatising quarantines of Roma settlements in the time of COVID-19 to targeted raids and excessive use of force,[62] these practices do more than harm individuals – they corrode public trust in systems tainted by racism.[63]

'The police use the concept of "clan criminality", I am told by Romani Rose, who chairs the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg, Germany. 'Records are being kept of families, and crime is once again made a characteristic of descent. Our communities are scared because they are very aware of their history, of the measures once taken by the Nazi state and the continued criminalisation of Sinti and Roma in the post-war period', he explains.

Racial profiling generates humiliation, bolsters prejudice and turns entire groups away from the institutions meant to serve them.[64]

How did those teenagers feel that night, hemmed in by sirens and the weight of inherited prejudice? And how do entire communities feel, knowing that the colour of their skin, the clothes they wear, or the neighbourhood they

Roma communities living in the settlement, where women recounted

come from, is enough to make them a target? How do they feel, watching it all unfold?

The same prejudice fuels the frequent raids on Roma and Traveller settlements and halting sites, in a constant search for 'suspects'. Police press releases boast of cracking down on crime, a narrative often echoed by high-level politicians and in the media, projecting criminalisation of entire communities. Yet, what these raids typically uncover are minor infractions such as makeshift connections to the electricity grid, irregularities such as having an expired ID card – or nothing at all.

These raids often happen before dawn. The Roma and Travellers I speak with say they are hardly ever shown a warrant. 'The children tremble with fear,' parents say. 'After that, how can you believe the police are here to help? They're even afraid of traffic officers.'

This is not the doing of a few 'bad apples'. It is a systemic problem – one that persists across many countries in Europe.

On my travels, I have collected stories – enraging stories – that show why that fear has taken root. I would like to share some of them with you.

The raids, the bus and the echoes of deep fear

In Finland, women tell me how Roma are treated not as individuals with rights, but as a group to be surveilled and watched out for. And when they need help from the police, they do not call. They are too afraid.

In 2021, it emerged that the Helsinki Police Department had been covertly monitoring Roma in 2013-2015. Thousands of records had been compiled on hundreds of individuals. According to the former Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, Kristina Stenman, the operation did not target offences, but was rather 'a manifestation of deep-rooted structural racism against the Roma'.[65]

Kristina Stenman is the Former Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, Finland.

'All of this has bred alienation and distrust,' Stenman says. 'Only one in ten racist incidents against Roma is reported – people don't believe anything will change, or they fear that they might get into trouble.'

In Slovakia, five Roma women tell me their story. They boarded a bus from Košice to Prešov for work. As they moved to sit in the front seats, the driver yelled, 'Go to the back. If you want to sit, you sit in the back.'

'He called us names and humiliated us,' they say.

They reported the incident to the company, which admitted fault. 'But when we took the bus again, we faced the same treatment. We don't go to the police. We don't trust them.'

'Why don't I trust the police?'

'Because they raid our homes. They chase us for no reason.'

Their words echo a deeper fear – one rooted not just in that bus ride, but in years of lived experience.

Though I am told that the large-scale police raids that once struck fear into Roma settlements in Slovakia have stopped, the memories remain vivid.

Communities still carry the weight of past violence – brutal operations, degrading treatment, and unanswered cries for justice – condemned by the European Court of Human Rights, to which they finally turned.[66]

The National Preventive Mechanism, set up in Slovakia in 2023, and regular police training offer a measure of hope, but trust remains fragile.

Communities still recoil from turning to the police, wary of indifference or mistreatment.

Persistent flaws in investigations – especially where racial bias should be examined – continue to cast long shadows over progress.[67]

In Greece, I am told of repeated reports of police raids in Roma settlements and of communities' complaints of being the targets of ill-treatment.[68]

In Halandri, a Roma woman recounts how she keeps receipts for every purchase to prevent the police from seizing her belongings, implying they may not belong to her.

She described a raid where authorities tried to confiscate her husband's musical instrument - his livelihood - and her daughter's wedding dowry. During the raid, tear gas was thrown into their home, despite the presence of children and elderly persons.

'It's just the way it is. We will not intervene.'

Distrust runs so deep that 31% of Irish Travellers who have experienced a crime in the past five years never reported it to the police.[69]

Roma and Traveller women tell me they think twice about calling the police even in cases of gender-based violence or domestic abuse.

Those who do are often met with dismissal:[70] 'Violence is normal in your community,' they're told. 'We can't intervene.'

But violence against women does not belong to any one group. To treat it as something 'expected' within some communities is not only false – it also leaves women doubly trapped: by violence, and by institutions that are supposed to protect them, but instead look away. Claiming women's lives time and again.

On the afternoon of 3 May 2025, 36-year-old Ramajana Asan was murdered by her partner in Šuto Orizari, North Macedonia, despite her repeated pleas to the police for help.[71] Her death, now widely condemned, stands as another case of the authorities' failure to respond to domestic violence – and of discrimination which continues to leave Roma women unprotected when in need.

Fear of speaking out - and those who support access to justice

But cases of discrimination and abuse against Roma and Travellers rarely make it to the courts. Why, one might ask?

Lawyers who take on such cases describe the deep exclusion and fear that many Roma and Travellers experience.

Trust in the national justice system has long been

Senada Sali, a human rights lawyer, serves as Legal Director for the European Roma Rights Centre, an NGO that uses strategic litigation to protect the human rights of Roma communities.

eroded. Even when someone is willing to speak up, legal representation is often unaffordable – and civil society organisations that can take up strategic litigation for the communities are few. Funding for legal fees and court costs is minimal, if not entirely absent. Then there's the fear of retaliation.

Lawyer Ioanna Kourtovik recounts one case from Greece: a Roma family was holding a celebration when the police stormed their settlement. 'They beat a woman and children and destroyed the family's home. We announced the filing of complaints. Days later, officers returned to threaten the residents.'

When the legal team asked for the names of the officers involved, authorities refused – 'personal data,' they said.

When Roma and Travellers reach court, they face yet another hurdle: judges who treat them with contempt, issuing overly harsh sentences.

But the outcomes begin to shift, when Roma and Travellers are supported by dedicated legal advocates and when that support is backed by solidarity in society and by national institutions for the protection of human rights and equality.

'Recently, in several cases, Greek courts have issued acquittals for unauthorised connection to the electricity grid,' says Kourtovik. 'They have stated that families needed power for medical equipment or for their children to study.'

When the system fails you once again

Roma and Travellers widely perceive the justice system as stacked against them – overpoliced as suspects and underprotected as victims.[72]

In Greece, Roma families speak of their caravans set on fire in Heraklion Lagkada and of lacklustre investigations which led nowhere. The fruit of their hard work lost in minutes, without answers and without reparation.

In Ireland, official data confirm that Travellers, particularly Traveller women, are strikingly overrepresented in prison. Though Travellers make up just 0.7% of the population, they account for 10% of male prisoners – and up to 22% of female prisoners.[73]

I am told that Traveller women are often jailed for petty offences that would not lead to prison time for others.

Among community members, researchers and officials, the opinion is out – aggressive policing, harsher sentences, poverty and wider discrimination in society all play a part in Travellers' overrepresentation in prisons.

Roma face a similar pattern across Europe. Though the lack of ethnic data obscures the problem in many judicial systems, studies show a disproportionate number of Roma being imprisoned, from Spain to Czechia, Serbia

I meet with the team of the Irish Travellers Access to Justice Project at the University of Limerick in Ireland.

Other reports, on North Macedonia, point to Roma prisoners being held in the most squalid quarters in prisons,[75] beatings, denial of healthcare and in some cases, death in custody.[76]

But punishment doesn't end with release. A criminal record adds a second, heavy layer of stigma – and closes the door on futures.

Justice?

I began this chapter with the death of an 18-year-old Roma boy following a police chase.

Soon after, two more tragedies were reported.[77]

In December 2022, 16-year-old Kostas Frangoulis was shot by police during a chase, after leaving a petrol station without paying a €20 fuel bill.

The police officer responsible was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, with the sentence fully suspended.

In November 2023, 17-year-old Christos Michalopoulos was also shot dead by a police officer.

Every one of these lost lives is one too many.

But across our societies, such incidents form a disturbing pattern – one sustained by impunity, political silence, and tolerance of racist violence.

The families of these teenagers took to the streets. This time, citizens and lawyers stood beside them.

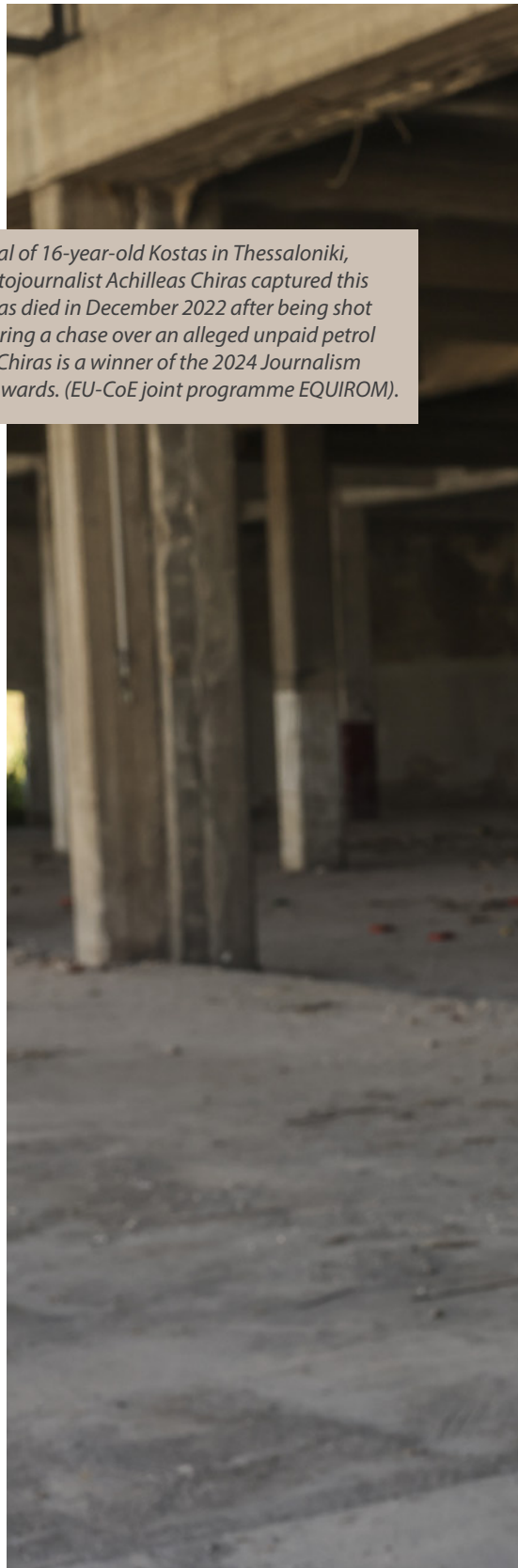
The mothers held a banner. It read, in large letters: 'Justis.'

The misspelling was no mistake – it was a cry born of exclusion, beginning with a plea for their children's right to go to school.

A thunderous demand for dignity and empowerment from communities long pushed to the margins.

For policing without racism and for accountability.

A call for urgent, lasting change: for an end to impunity and a justice system that protects rather than abandons, no matter who you are, or where you come from.



At the funeral of 16-year-old Kostas in Thessaloniki, Greece, photojournalist Achilleas Chiras captured this image. Kostas died in December 2022 after being shot by police during a chase over an alleged unpaid petrol station bill. Chiras is a winner of the 2024 Journalism Excellence Awards. (EU-CoE joint programme EQUIROM).

Inside the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg, Germany, a memorial room honours the victims of the genocide of the Sinti and Roma.

THE ARTS OF RESILIENCE

History to learn – culture to celebrate

It was more than a decade ago. I was travelling through Germany as a tourist when the train brought me to the university town of Heidelberg. Groups of young people sat in the sun drinking coffee. Boats drifted lazily down the river.

Then, at a bend in the road, I saw a sign: 'Permanent exhibition on the Sinti and Roma Holocaust', documenting the atrocities they faced during World War II – their history, as it unfolded alongside the systematic murder of six million European Jews and the persecution and killing of millions of others.[78]

I stepped inside.

I stood for a long time before a photograph.

It depicted a 'racial examination' conducted under the Nazi regime.

The Research Institute for Racial Hygiene and Demographic Biology in Nazi Germany drew up genealogical charts for Sinti and Roma, photographed them, recorded their physical traits – eye colour, hair colour, blood group – and filed them away. Aiming to classify and trace Sinti and Roma, labelled as 'racially inferior' and pursued by a system which linked descendance to criminality.

For them, only the presumption of guilt applied.

What followed was the deportation, torture and murder of some 500 000 – Samudaripen: the Roma Holocaust.[79]

Yet for decades, the history of their genocide remained on the margins, buried in denial and antigypsyism.

But even when the world refused to listen, some kept telling the truth.

Truth unveiled – but we still have so far to go

In Heidelberg, Romani Rose waits for me at the entrance of the memorial exhibition on the Sinti and Roma Holocaust.[80]

This time, I am not a tourist – I came following a letter he had sent me as Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe.

Rose lost thirteen members of his family in the death camps. He speaks of them and of those who have survived.

Rose's family had owned a cinema. After the war, they chose not to leave Germany. It was their homeland.

Following the collapse of the Nazi regime, recognition and reparations were offered to the regime's victims. But Sinti and Roma were not acknowledged as victims of racial persecution.[81]

Romani Rose chairs both the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma and the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma.

'The same officers who had served the Third Reich were still working in the police after the fall of National Socialism,' Rose says. 'They were the ones deciding that Sinti and Roma didn't deserve reparations, justifying their own atrocities.'

But Rose and others of his generation were determined to end discrimination and secure recognition of the Nazi genocide of Sinti and Roma.

'On Good Friday 1980, twelve Sinti began a hunger strike in Dachau,' Rose recalls, speaking about several milestones of the decades-long civil rights work of German Sinti and Roma.[82] 'It was a powerful moral act, especially as some of the strikers were themselves survivors.'

In 1982, the German government officially recognised the genocide of Sinti and Roma.[83]

Today, international and European remembrance[84] has a deep meaning for the communities and for us all. It is a call to remember, commit to unity, and never let the past happen again.

The Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg and its exhibitions are the outcome of a long struggle for recognition, memory, and equal cultural participation.

Romani Rose speaks with pride about how police trainees in Germany now visit the Centre as part of their mandatory training.

For history cannot remain confined to symbolic acknowledgement – it must be made visible, taught, embedded in public conscience. Telling the truth – early, clearly, and consistently – is vital.

Through documenting and teaching, the facts of the history of Roma in Europe are unveiled: the horror and injustices they faced, the centuries of slavery,[85] ongoing persecution and the genocide.

And along with this, the power and resilience of the communities. Their art as a means of resistance. The richness of their identities.

Diverse, beautiful, and rich

Roma and Travellers' arts and cultures are not separate from their history in Europe – they are at its heart. Their diverse identities are imprinted in the European tapestry of cultures, even if their contribution and influence have often gone unrecognised.

Icons of European art carry Roma influences or even originate from Roma roots. Flamenco is an artform born out of Roma resistance and later endorsed as Spanish national heritage. The lively rondo of Beethoven's

Michael Collins locks a barrel-top wagon at the Avila Park halting site in Dublin. Built by his uncle, James Collins, the wagon is used by them to tour Ireland and share its history.

Seventh Symphony, many parts of the musical oeuvres of Liszt, Brahms, Sarasate, Dvorak, Ravel (and many others) are inspired by or contain Roma musical traditions. And the list goes on.

It is still, I am told in Dublin, the struggle of many Irish Travellers – recognised as an indigenous ethnic minority since 2017, yet so often faced with disregard for their language, artistry, and the pillar of their nomadic traditions: the centuries-old culture of horse husbandry.[86]

'Roma arrived in Europe a thousand years ago,' says cultural theorist Timea Junghaus. 'And through a violent history, even through slavery and genocide, we managed to preserve our heritage, our culture, and our language.'

'It is a culture of resilience,' she adds. 'One kept alive by the assertive voices of Roma women, who pass on our stories from generation to generation – nurturing families and the history of their ancestors with memory and pride.'

Artists like Papusza and Ceija Stojka gave voice to the dignity and humanity of Roma women, and spoke out against censorship, oppression, and violence within and beyond their communities.[87]

Junghaus is a contemporary art curator and executive director of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC), a joint initiative of the Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundations, and the Roma Leaders' initiative – the Alliance for the European Roma Institute

Two boys drive a horse cart in Limerick, Ireland.

for Arts and Culture, launched in 2017. ERIAC promotes Roma culture across Europe, educates the public in Roma arts, and confronts antigypsyism.[88]

She speaks with admiration for the new wave of Roma artists and their presence, from starring in Netflix productions to crafting handmade jewellery.

In the visual arts, Roma exhibit at major institutions and biennales, earning prestigious residencies. In film, Roma directors gain ground, especially in documentaries and short films that speak to shared human values.

Roma literature is entering a new era. Roma writers are claiming their space on the world's literary map.

And in music, from flamenco to classical, the tradition continues with unmatched skill and vitality, Junghaus adds.

But more than anything, Roma and Traveller artists are challenging decades of misrepresentation in the media and cultural industries. They are forging a new language – one of pride, liberation, self-determination and authorship.

Death - Roma Train to Auschwitz-Birkenau (1992) painting by Ceija Stojka (1933-2013), Roma artist, Holocaust survivor who bore witness of the camps and spoke out against denial and forgetting, and against the antigypsyism pervasive in Europe. Artwork from the collection of the Museum of Romani Culture, Brno.

This is over: Opre Roma!

'Roma are constantly trapped in caricatural depictions,' Junghaus says, reflecting on ridiculing portrayals in well-known Eastern European cinema. 'This is visual violence.'

And it's not limited to one region only.

'They satirise Roma, and show us only as delinquents and outcasts,' says former Spanish MP Ismael Cortés Gómez, who has devoted his work at ERIAC, as a Board Member, to fighting these stereotypes and promoting Roma culture.

But he and Junghaus point to another injustice, one less visible: the denial of Roma communities' right to access their own cultural heritage.

'More than 30,000 Roma artworks are held in state collections,' Junghaus reports. 'Yet Roma people have no access to them.'

'Over two million photographs of our ancestors are stored in ethnographic museums and archives,' Junghaus adds. 'But they're not labelled with Roma names. They carry the names of the collectors and anthropologists.'

Roma communities' quest for justice and equality erupted in 1971, at the First World Roma Congress in London, with a powerful resolve: 'This is over!'[89]

Their chosen flag, anthem, and the motto 'Opre Roma!' – 'Stand up, Roma!' would become symbols of their claim for their rightful place as political actors in history.

They set out to reclaim authorship and redefine how they would be seen.

No longer subjects of someone else's narrative. No longer rendered voiceless by dehumanising imagery.

They would tell their own story – with clarity and dignity.

Walking in Strasbourg with the Roma flag on 8 April 2025 to mark International Roma Day.

Sukaripe, beauty of the soul

'Let's turn to a very different representation of Roma,' Junghaus says, speaking about the work of a contemporary Roma photographer.

The pictures capture moments of celebration, protest, and Roma and Sinti artists receiving awards, or taking the stage to applause.

In these photographs, they appear as they are: talented, confident, visionary – embracing their identity and leading change. As I study the images, I think of the young Roma and Traveller women and men sharing the pain of childhoods deprived of role models from their communities.

'When I was growing up, I didn't see anyone who looked like me in a positive role. That absence is deeply damaging', says actress, filmmaker and ARTivist Alina Șerban, recalling her childhood in Romania.

'Representation is power. I want Roma girls to know that their identity is a source of power, not shame,' she adds.

Spyros, a 25-year-old Roma from Greece, spoke of a singer he admired who once revealed her Roma heritage, only to be pressured immediately by her music label to retract it. Like many of his generation, he longed to see people from his community not only succeed but do so with pride in their roots.

Spyros is one of the six young Roma at the heart of a campaign in Greece broadcast across television networks and social media.

The campaign's motto was one word: 'Sukaripe'.[90] '

'It means "beauty of the soul" Spyros says proudly. 'It comes from our language – Romanes.'

Amazons and fighters

Hilja Grönfors performed to a sold-out crowd at the Helsinki Music Centre, honouring the Romani musical heritage she has carried all her life.

'It was a unique moment,' the folk musician, Honorary Doctor of the University of the Arts Helsinki and Member of Finnish Academy, says, moved. 'We've lived in Finland for centuries, but many people have never heard Romani music. And even fewer know our language. I hope music can open hearts.'

She sings a mesmerising melody, a cappella. Then explains what meanings these songs carry.

'In our culture, what matters is coexistence. Looking one another in the eye. That's how change begins. Our songs warn, teach, strengthen. When I sing, I share stories from my childhood – passing on our values.'

Hilja and her sister Helena, who is a pedagogue and textile artist, also work with the Finnish Museum of Romani Culture[91], where they preserve traditional crafts, hold workshops and teach the Romani language.

Hilja and Helena Grönfors from Finland. Hilja is a folk musician. She was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the Arts Helsinki and is a member of the Finnish Academy. Helena is a pedagogue and textile artist.

Teaching Romani, like preserving and celebrating Roma and Traveller arts and cultures, is an act of resistance. Against erasure. Against distortion. Against silence.

'Being an ARTivist means using my creativity and my life experience to challenge injustice and give visibility to those erased. I didn't choose art as a luxury. I chose it because I had no other way to survive, to speak, to be seen,' says Șerban.

In every country I visited, I saw women as keepers of memory and catalysts for change.

Roma women artists – poets, writers, filmmakers, musicians – are at the heart of this engagement. Through their work, they bridge generations, break silences, and speak unflinching truths.

'Telling the truth through film, theatre, and storytelling is an act of resistance. Without memory, there can be no justice', Șerban continues. 'We are Amazons and fighters. We are a counterculture to every form of racism', tells Junghaus.

It is 8 April. International Roma Day.

In Strasbourg, we gather with Roma and Traveller youth from across Europe and toss red flowers into the river – symbols of remembrance, of hope, of solidarity.

And I carry with me the words of a Roma woman:

'Our struggle is to show the world that Roma are full of pride and dignity. In respect, there is voice – many voices, never silence.'

On International Roma Day 2025, flowers were cast into the river from a passerelle near the Council of Europe building in Strasbourg.

ARE WE DOING ENOUGH TO STOP ONE OF EUROPE'S GREATEST HUMAN RIGHTS SCANDALS?

The machinery meant to protect

Through these pages, we have walked a long road together.

Along this road, Roma and Traveller women and girls, Roma and Traveller change makers, and allies generously offered insights into their stories – of resistance, hope and success.

But what are we doing – as institutions, as societies?

Because just as policies and protections leave their trace, so do indifference and inaction. Everything is written on human bodies and souls – on all of us who share this world.

No one can say they did not know. The available data, patchy as it may be, is damning. We know the truth: at the root of inequalities and abuse lie racism, discrimination and embedded injustice.

Skewed power structures, continued exclusion of the communities and extreme deprivation.

None of these yield to mere good intentions or promises made on paper.

The human rights protection machinery is made of a complex blend of institutions, laws, partnerships and mechanisms interacting with each other.

Let us delve into some of these, knowing that they are works in progress, with improvement ahead.

European frameworks of protection

Years ago, the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU) made solemn commitments to improve the lives of Roma and Travellers across their member states.[92]

They have set standards, launched novel initiatives, and joined forces[93] – along with providing funding – to accelerate Europe's action in safeguarding and advancing the rights of Roma and Travellers.

There are clear achievements to be shared and replicated more widely.

Yet, the gap between targets and reality remains vast. Too often, progress is limited and uneven, and - in some countries - closing that divide has become more urgent than ever.

It is time to face this reality and move beyond short-term interventions, limited (and often inaccessible) funding, weak national bodies and tokenistic initiatives.

A few indispensable ingredients are needed for real change. Clear priorities, stable and strategic funding aligned with actual needs, a holistic approach, and strong oversight coupled with accountability. To work in partnership with Roma and Travellers, calling out prejudice and forging improvement together.

What's essential is vision and political will – turning ideas from paper into action, and persisting through consistent change.

From European institutions, heads of government to local authorities, funding bodies and whoever has the power to be of support, this commitment must run deep. Solidarity is crucial.

Connecting the dots

When each piece aligns, the complete picture emerges: a vision of sustainable change.

The vital link between needs, policy, and funds must translate into coherent action led by community input which delivers its impact effectively, respectfully, on time – and for as long as it is needed.

'To truly address the complex challenges Roma communities face, we need to adopt a more ambitious, European perspective – one that recognises the scale of the issues and is prepared to tackle them with appropriately large-scale investments. Small, piecemeal efforts won't be enough', states Belén Sánchez-Rubio, head of the International Department at *Fundación Secretariado Gitano*, holding the Technical Secretariat of the European Network on Roma Equality under EU Funds.[94]

The right approach is holistic, integrated, community-focused, and long-term. Starting with acknowledging the racism still embedded in our societies and institutions, and committing to engage all tools and mechanisms to break down discrimination, wherever it is found.

An approach that takes into account Roma and Traveller women and girls – not as an afterthought, but as part of the original plan, to which they must be key parties. One that considers how measures really work for women and girls, and how to avoid impacts that would harm them.

Drawing 'the red lines' for today and the future

To achieve results, policies must also serve as benchmarks of progress and accountability – with the full use of all mechanisms of enforcement, including the powerful EU infringement procedure.

Red lines must be established - clear boundaries that European institutions will not allow member states to cross, sending a firm signal that the human rights of Roma and Travellers are non-negotiable.

Looking ahead, the human rights situation of Roma and Travellers must not be brushed aside in the design, implementation, monitoring and funding of all sectoral policies. Targeted measures must be combined with broader frameworks – whether addressing affordable housing, child poverty, education or fostering a green and digital transition, competitiveness, and innovation. Mainstreaming must never mean erasing or downplaying those most in need; instead, it must build a coherent system of protection that leaves no one behind.

But inclusion on paper is not enough. It will not work without putting the right money, in the right way, where it matters.

What we refuse to see

Investment must also reach another vital area: the racism embedded within state institutions. The schools, the health system, and other public services. The police and

A dwelling at the Tsairia settlement, Thessaloniki, Greece.

the courts. The centres of power. This is not about one person or one office. It is about systems that are built in ways that exclude Roma and Travellers by default – through layers of historical inequality, embedded prejudice, and decisions that overlook them.

If we are serious about advancing the human rights of Roma and Travellers, we must confront racism where it may be most entrenched.

'Antigypsyism is perhaps the greatest obstacle to Roma inclusion,' says Sheena Keller, social inclusion expert and Roma rights advocate, currently Senior Sector Officer at the EEA and Norway Grants.

'Funding and national strategies have been slow to engage with it – and the truth is, more than money is needed. Ministries require support, expertise and guidance to shape policies that are both effective and respectful. They also have to engage with Roma in meaningful ways.'

Action must converge from many directions, combining proactive support such as capacity- building with a firm response – accountability and remedy – when violations occur.

But support is often missing, or withdrawn, precisely from where it can have decisive impact – with strategic litigation as a stark example.

When the European Court of Human Rights made its ruling in the *Elmazova* case from North Macedonia – a case we discussed earlier – it struck a blow against school segregation and compelled national authorities and others to act.

Yet, despite a series of other judgments of the Court,[95] the reality is that for many Roma and Traveller communities, such judicial victories – resonating far beyond the courtroom – remain few and far between.

Why is that so?

Reasons abound, including the reluctance to invest in litigation which ultimately aims to hold donors to account.

But how are defenders to reach courts if there is no funding to pay a lawyer or even office lights?

Some organisations, out of necessity, turned to the United States for support – and received it, until the current administration cut funding for human rights.

This quickly triggered a domino effect, widening the gap and forcing many to close their doors or work without salaries.

And while other funding structures should step up to fill the gap, some are actually cutting their funds or retreating altogether just when they are needed most.[96]

Central governments – a lead actor in name, not always in deed

In fact, Roma and Traveller communities are rarely treated as a political priority. Despite proclamations of national inclusion strategies, many risk becoming empty promises – lacking proper implementation, monitoring, funding, and accountability.

The EU and the Council of Europe provide direction, expertise and funding. But it is the member states, their central governments that bear primary responsibility for decisions, the management of resources, the coordination of measures and their effective implementation.

'The EU has created targeted funding streams – but how, or whether, these funds are used remains at the discretion of each national government', explains Belén Sánchez-Rubio.

Time is also a factor. 'Changing mindsets, building trust, and creating real opportunities takes time. But funds are often allocated for shorter terms, even within longer-term budgets,' she adds.

'This disrupts processes that need continuity. If you've started a teaching programme for children to catch up on some benchmarks, and funding stops mid-way through, that support vanishes – and with it, the children's progress.'

Too often, officials are blind to the real-world impact of such disruptions – perhaps because they've never stepped inside a settlement or sat at a Roma family's table or because Roma and Traveller communities were not included when official decisions were made.

But change, I've learned, is often sparked by proximity. When policymakers come face to face with reality, something can shift.

The game changer is often at local level – and inaction is not an option

After decades of working in this field, one thing has become clear: real progress often begins – or ends – with a mayor.

Local authorities understand the fabric of their communities – the relationships and needs rarely captured in reports. They hold the keys to access, familiarity, and trust – vital tools for addressing real needs with dignity and precision. These are the actors who know their communities best.

Yet when it comes to local powers, the scandal is often not the lack of money, but the failure to use it properly.

In some cases, local authorities have even returned unspent funds – not because the needs were met, but because the money was never invested at all. Because of missing will, fear of voters' backlash, lack of specialists – and because of racism.

Some funding bodies are now developing strategies to increase the involvement of local authorities and their access to funding, also by providing better co-funding conditions and technical assistance to apply to funding opportunities and in the implementation of the projects.

In practice, the process is often fraught.

'I've seen excellent projects unable to move forward simply because no local authority was willing to partner,' says Keller. 'Some mayors actively avoid any association with pro-Roma initiatives because of the stigma.'

Results are often seen where bold local leadership that outlasts electoral cycles can transcend personal agendas, and anchor inclusion in policy, not just personality.

Devolved powers also come with their share of challenges: obligations without the capacity to raise sufficient funds or gain expertise, cooperation and coordination gaps, and divided, unclear responsibilities which ultimately grind progress to a halt – again, with little accountability.

Initiatives like the one launched by the Municipality of Halandri in Greece, to ensure that Roma families could relocate to better conditions[97] – which I mentioned in the first chapter – show the downsides of local authorities being left without sufficient resources to address the issues communities face.

Central governments must step in, upholding the state's obligation to protect human rights. Decentralisation should be about ensuring the best possible responses tailored to the local context – not an excuse to avoid responsibility.

The national allies who show up

At country level, national institutions for the protection of human rights and equality are crucial institutional allies of Roma and Travellers. They can handle individual cases, provide input to national strategies and action plans, document protection gaps and make recommendations on ways forward, every so often bringing fresh approaches and breaking new ground.

You may remember that, in Finland, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman supported two young Roma hairdressers who were dismissed from their jobs for wearing traditional dress – a case that has set a landmark precedent.

Vaska Bajramovska-Mustafa, Deputy Ombudsman, North Macedonia.

In Ireland, following a complaint by Traveller advocacy groups, the Ombudsman for Children launched an investigation into the deplorable conditions at the Spring Lane halting site.[98] The inquiry uncovered serious risks to the health and safety of children. In response, a €17.9 million investment was announced in 2024 to fully upgrade the site – a promising collaboration between local authorities, independent institutions and the community itself.

In North Macedonia, the Ombudsperson and the Commission for the Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (CPPD) have repeatedly documented school segregation of Roma children and made recommendations to the authorities to address it. The CPPD also took up the question of intersectional discrimination of Roma women.[99]

In Slovakia, the National Centre for Human Rights and the Public Defender of Rights have been vocal about the urgent need to deliver justice for Roma women who have been subjected to forced sterilisation. They have also documented various forms of segregation, including in education and healthcare settings.

In October 2024, I gathered Equality Bodies from a large number of member states in Strasbourg to discuss how they can make sure that they are truly accessible to those marginalised in our societies, including Roma and Traveller communities.[100] I was impressed by the dynamic approach of some of these institutions, which regularly reach out to the communities and visit settlements. We discussed how ensuring the presence of Roma and Travellers on the boards or staff of the institutions is also critical.

And yet, national institutions for the protection of human rights and equality are under mounting strain. They face budget cuts and rising political pressure. But difficult contexts cannot justify states' shrinking support. If anything, they make bolstering it up more urgent than ever.

'Nothing about us without us'

Within this machinery, it is civil society that moves most tirelessly – the organisations, the lawyers, the defenders, the Roma and Traveller communities themselves and within them, so prominently, women.

They are the ones who carry not only the weight of injustice but the knowledge of resilience, of diversity, of collective strength and solidarity. They push for change, grounded in evidence. They organise, advocate, empower. They build trust where institutions have failed.

And though they face all sorts of risks, their voice does not falter:

'Nothing about us without us.'

Civil society demands that the rights of Roma and Travellers be placed not at the margins, but at the heart of mainstream agendas – as an integral part of the European social fabric. They call for donors and funding structures to work hand-in-hand with communities from the very beginning – funding and targeted investments that are shaped by their needs – not just to tick boxes of project-based grants.

And yet, month after month, many of these organisations operate on the edge of collapse, their survival relying on winning short-term grants, barely sustaining their daily

Top: Carmen Gheorghe, President of E-Romnja, an NGO that supports the human rights of Roma women and girls in Romania.

Bottom: Roma women cook together before an E-Romnja meeting.

operations, leaving little scope for growth or innovation. Their engagement at risk of becoming focused on donors' expectations, rather than responding to authentic needs. Their role being reduced to service providers for pre-defined funding lines.

'Public funds are typically administered through predefined frameworks and priorities, and ultimately rely on which projects apply. Embedding intersectionality into funding structures is not easy', Sheena Keller explains, speaking about gaps in funding that targets actual demand. 'We need dedicated funding calls – explicitly and exclusively focused on supporting Roma women'.

'Being kept outside policies, programmes, decisions, and institutions - where people plan and implementing projects for Roma women, without them – this must end', says Carmen Gheorghe, President of *E-Romnja*.

'Roma women and girls – and those who defend them – need to be trusted as experts of their own lives. That means funding their initiatives directly, inviting them into decision-making spaces, and ensuring their voices are not just heard, but respected and acted on', points out Romanian Roma actress, filmmaker and ARTivist Alina Șerban.

Limited funding remains a problem. Funding models often require organisations working on the ground to front the costs themselves, with reimbursement delayed by months – an uneven system that favors the well-resourced and pits the few civil society actors against each other in a competition for already scarce funding made available. Liquidity becomes a barrier for those with no financial resilience, such as smaller, grassroots organisations. Without core funding to keep them afloat, survival becomes a daily struggle.

Still, they are the ones called to fill every gap the state leaves behind. They show up when no one else does.

'We are more than stories of struggle – we are architects of change,' said Almedina Skenderi, a young Roma activist from the NGO Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo*, during International Roma Day celebrations in Strasbourg on 8 April 2025.[101]

I believe that too.

I learnt it from the girls and the boys who speak their truth with pride. From the children who refuse to live within limits they did not choose.

'We have big goals for our future. Let us be proud.'

And it is our responsibility – not just to listen, but to harness the full strength of the human rights protection machinery, creating opportunities for the communities to forge a future on their own terms.

*Almedina Skenderi, a podcaster and Roma activist of the NGO Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo**

THE URGENCY IS REAL

On the outskirts of Thessaloniki, in June 2024, a group of small Roma children gathered around me, telling me about their dreams of becoming a pilot, a lawyer, a beautician…

In other parts of Europe, I hear other dreams:

'I dream of us all being equal.'

'I just want a decent place to live.'

'I dream of hundreds of women and girls marching in the streets, proud, occupying space as everyone else.'

'I dream of Traveller children celebrating their culture, being themselves, and having opportunities.'

I don't know if these dreams will ever be achieved. I certainly hope so. But what I do know is that for these dreams to come true, action must follow.

First, we must stand up to racism. To indifference. To injustice.

Put an end to the racism and discrimination ingrained in our societies – the kind that ignores and silences Roma and Travellers, tolerates police violence, segregates children in schools and women in maternity wards, and excludes them from workplaces and neighbourhoods.

The kind that forces human beings to fight daily for their rights and dignity and sometimes, their very survival - in societies that are supposed to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

It is the responsibility of all of us to break the brutal deadlock of marginalisation.

Europe and its institutions, national governments, regional and local authorities, all share this duty - to ensure that no one is left behind[102].

We must confront narratives that divide the world into 'us' and 'them'.

Shake up an entire society that does not react with the same urgency, the same empathy, to every injustice.

Tear down the barriers to women's and girls' empowerment. Listen to, support, and provide space and opportunities for women and girls to advocate for their rights and lead change.

Support Roma and Traveller-led initiatives, genuinely. Especially those who put the human rights of women and girls at their heart. Not just in words, but through real action: shifting power dynamics, redistributing resources, and making their needs and priorities central.

Pay attention to those facing intolerance towards the specific interacting aspects of their identities and protect them from the compounding effects of intersectional discrimination.

Don't forget the local. Invest in grassroot initiatives, community empowerment and development.

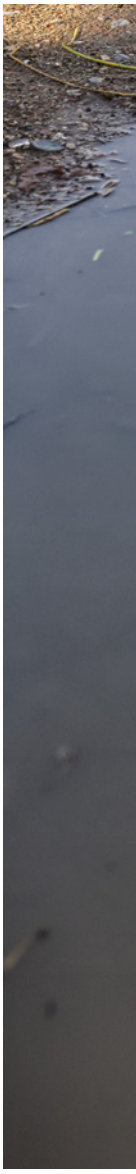
Make sure that technical frameworks, bureaucratic rules, and funding mechanisms actually connect to the real-life needs of communities and individuals.

Throughout this journey, I've invited you to hold your gaze in the mirror – to reflect, challenge your assumptions, and stand in solidarity.

We must do this today because the urgency is real.

Everything we need is already here – the knowledge, the good practices, the tools.

What we must do is match up the will to use them.



A girl in the Tsairia settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece.

THE RESPONSIBILITY IS OURS

A call to action

Each of us is responsible for building a world where everyone lives in safety and dignity.

We must confront the fact that injustices in our societies concern us all.

Today's prejudice, racism, and discrimination against Roma and Travellers are rooted in centuries of violence and exclusion – a stark exposure of our shared failure.

It is up to each of us, to me and to you, to change all this.

To shatter the silence of indifference and raise our voices.

To challenge stereotypes and stand up to inequality and injustices in our daily lives.

To demand that everyone – individuals and institutions alike, respect the law, fulfil their responsibilities, and turn words into action.

Each of us, and all of us together, must now:

Recognise and call out antigypsyism and discrimination; combat it at every level, in every place, and by every means available.

Listen to and respect Roma and Travellers' voices, especially those of women and girls, ensuring they have a seat at the decision-making table.

Prioritise and fully commit to advancing the human rights of Roma and Travellers in every aspect of their lives.

Help build a life of dignity with decent homes, healthcare, quality and inclusive education, jobs, and safety nets for all.

Reform systems across all sectors to make equality, justice and inclusion for Roma and Travellers a reality.

Leave no one behind: ensure resources and action reach those in poverty, who are isolated or excluded by discrimination, regardless of the grounds.

Gather the facts on the situation of Roma and Travellers and use data to adjust action.

A girl play in the Tsairia settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Plan smartly and for the long-term, together with those concerned, ensuring policies and funds match needs.

Act on our words: take responsibility, cooperate effectively, follow through on commitments and answer for the results.

Support Roma and Traveller civil society to monitor rights, build opportunities for empowerment, and take legal action where needed.

Reject and challenge misinformation and hate; ensure Roma and Travellers have swift access to justice when their rights are violated.

Stop the criminalisation of communities, hold police to account when they unjustly target Roma and Travellers, and stand up for their right to fair treatment by all authorities.

Recognise, promote and celebrate Roma and Traveller history, languages, culture, and arts; respect the communities' diverse identities.

Stand with Roma and Travellers: work together, especially with women and girls, to advance equality and justice in a Europe where everyone truly belongs.

METHODOLOGY

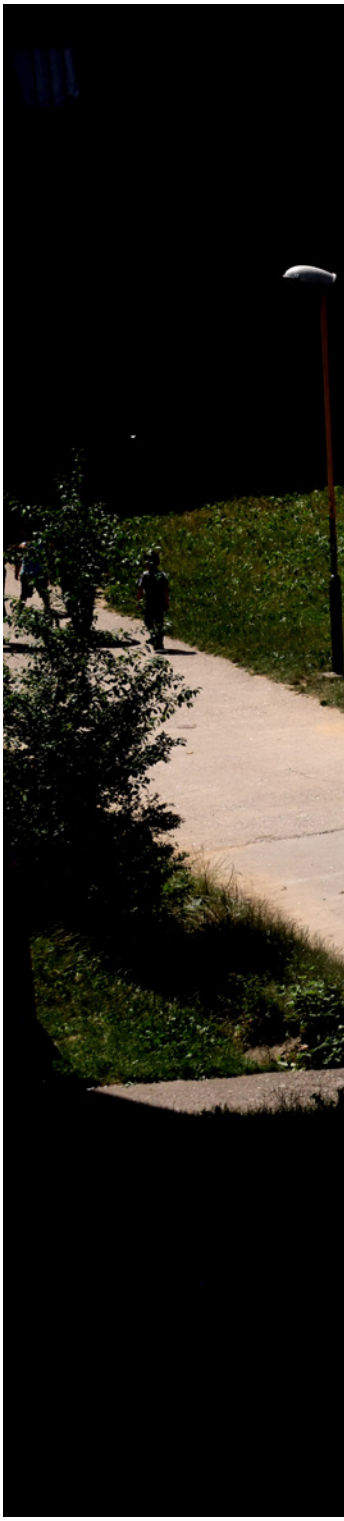
This book sets out the Commissioner's observations on some of the most urgent human rights issues that speak to the lived experiences of the members of Roma and Traveller communities today. Structured into seven narrative chapters, it explores key concerns related to living conditions and housing; education; health; employment and occupation; policing and justice systems; history, arts and culture; and the machinery meant to ensure protection in all these areas and beyond. It concludes with the Commissioner's call to action.

The book draws primarily on the Commissioner's engagement with members of Roma and Traveller communities, especially women and girls, human rights defenders, central and local authorities and National Human Rights Institutions, Equality Bodies and Ombudsman institutions. These engagements took place during visits and missions to Council of Europe member states, as well as other activities, from June 2024 to April 2025. The book features the Commissioner's insights, human stories and testimonials and leans on qualitative and quantitative data and information sourced from official statistics and reports, research studies and other evidence available in the public domain.

Gender, youth and intersectional perspectives have been integrated in the book to best cover human rights issues which are representative of different identities and cohorts. Content does not purport to be reflective of all situations. The narrative is driven by the lived experiences of Roma and Traveller women and girls and the power of their collective engagement, leading change across generations. It highlights Roma and Traveller women and girls' empowerment, agency and resilience, while illustrating their concerns in the broader context of antigypsyism and discrimination affecting their communities. Specific attention is also paid to the role of civil society organisations as driving forces to advance the human rights of Roma and Travellers. The individuals referred to in this book are as they self-identified. Some names have been changed in the text to protect identities and preserve privacy.

The book is accompanied by the travelling photo exhibition curated by the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). It can be hosted upon request to the Office of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights at commissionerHR@coe.int.

This book was finalised on 1 September 2025. All online documents quoted were last accessed on that date.



Children play at the Stará Teheľňa neighbourhood in Prešov, Slovakia.

A traditional barrel-top wagon at the Avila Park halting site in Dublin, Ireland.

ENDNOTES

* All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions, or population, in this text, shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

1. The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.
2. For the term 'antigypsyism', see European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), General Policy Recommendation No. 13 on combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma, adopted on 24 June 2011 and amended on 1 December 2020. It is noted that many Travellers do not consider that the term antigypsyism reflects their particular experiences of racism. For considerations on terminology, see also "Antigypsyism: causes, prevalence, consequences, possible responses", a study commissioned by the Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM).
3. For the term 'racism', see ECRI, General Policy Recommendation No. 7 on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination, adopted on 12 December 2002 and amended on 7 December 2017
4. For more information see Council of Europe's estimates, updated on 2 July 2012.
5. See European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR), Decision on Complaint No. 206/2022, submitted by DCI, FEANTSA, MEDEL, CCOO and International Movement ATD Fourth World v. Spain, published on 26 February 2025.
6. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (CoE CommHR), Michael O'Flaherty, letter to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, 5 May 2025.
7. See Council of Europe, Congress Rapporteur welcomes Sofia's commitment to social housing in implementing European Court judgments, 6 June 2025.
8. See CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the Human Rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland, 25 February 2025. See also former CoE CommHR, Dunja Mijatović, country visit report, United Kingdom, 9 December 2022.
9. See Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec(2005)4 to member states on improving the housing conditions of Roma and Travellers in Europe, adopted on 23 February 2005; United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN Habitat, Fact Sheet No. 21 (Rev. 1): The Human Right to Adequate Housing, 1 November 2009 and Fact Sheet No. 25 (Rev. 1): Forced Evictions and Human Rights, 1 May 2014.
10. For more information, see, for example, the work of ETP Slovensko – Centrum pre udržateľný rozvoj (ETP Slovakia – Centre for Sustainable Development), Building hope at Luník IX – Self-help Construction of family Houses at Luník IX and Projekt DOM.ov, Projects, Kecerovce and other municipalities, Slovakia; see also HERO – Housing and Empowerment for Roma, pilot project funded by the European Union and implemented by the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) with partners in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, 2021-2025.
11. See EEA and Norway Grants, The right to a decent life! How the lives of the most disadvantaged community in Cluj-Napoca started to change with the help of Norway Grants, 5 September 2024.
12. See EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – impact on Roma and Travellers - Bulletin 5, 2020; European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), Roma Rights in the Time of COVID, 2020.
13. UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 14 on the highest attainable standard of health, 2000, E/C.12/2000/4; OHCHR, Fact Sheet No. 31: The Right to Health, 2008; former CoE CommHR, Dunja Mijatović, Protecting the right to health through inclusive and resilient health care for all, Issue Paper, 2021.
14. See Explanatory Memorandum to Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on equality of Roma and Traveller women and girls, adopted on 5 April 2024 (Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)1).
15. See, among others, Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC), Fifth Opinion on Ireland, adopted on 16 October 2024; CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland, 25 February 2025, paragraph 48.

16. See Behaviour and Attitudes Traveller Community National Survey, July 2017.
17. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre is a national NGO comprising Travellers, Roma and majority population that works at local, regional, national and international levels to address Traveller and Roma inequalities and promote human rights. For more information, see: www.paveepoint.ie.
18. Civil Rights Defenders, Environmental racism and Europe's Roma, 2023; See also ACFC, Environmental challenges and national minorities, Factsheet, 2025.
19. ERRC, North Macedonia: Victory for Roma in Šuto Orizari following mass complaint about waste pollution, 13 May 2025. The Equality Body noted that there were serious issues with the system of waste collection in Skopje in general, but that there was an unequal provision of waste management services.
20. See Explanatory Memorandum to Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)1..
21. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has determined that sterilisation without the informed consent of women of Roma origin breached Articles 3 (prohibition of torture or inhuman treatment or punishment) and 8 (right to protection of private and family life) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Furthermore, even in instances where consent had formally been sought, the ECtHR found significant disregard for patient autonomy and choice, with the manner of obtaining consent likely to evoke feelings of fear, anguish, and inferiority in victims, resulting in lasting suffering (violation of Article 3 ECHR). The ECtHR also found that the lack of promptness and reasonable expedition in investigating such incidents constituted a violation of Article 3 ECHR. See ECtHR V.C. v. Slovakia, Application no. 18968/07, 8 November 2011 and ECtHR I.G. and others v. Slovakia, Application no. 15966/04, 13 November 2012.
22. CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Letter to the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, 3 December 2024.
23. CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights situation of Roma in Slovakia, 25 February 2025. See also Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic, Meeting with the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, 11 July 2024.
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26. For more information, see the mission and activities of Healthy Regions: https://www.zdraveregiony.eu/.
27. See also CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights situation of Roma in Slovakia, 25 February 2025, paragraphs 38-43.
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29. CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights situation of Roma and on issues related to the right to a clean and healthy environment in North Macedonia, 29 July 2025.
30. See Position Paper by the former CoE CommHR, Nils Muižnieks, Fighting school segregation in Europe through inclusive education, 2017; ACFC, Thematic Commentary No. 1 on Education under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, adopted on 31 May 2024, revising and replacing Thematic Commentary No. 1 (2006) (hereinafter ACFC Thematic Commentary No.1 on Education).
31. ECtHR, Salay v. Slovakia, Application no. 29359/22, 27 February 2025. The European Commission started an infringement procedure against Slovakia in 2015 and sent a reasoned opinion in 2019. On 19 April 2023, the European Commission decided to refer Slovakia to the Court of Justice of the European Union for failing to effectively tackle the issue of segregation of Roma children in education. In this respect, see also Opinion of Advocate General Ćapeta delivered on 1 August 2025 in the Case C799/23 European Commission v Slovak Republic.
32. See Poradňa, Na ceste k spravodlivosti, Príbehy Rómok a Rómov, ktorí sa postavili proti diskriminácii a inému porušovaniu svojich ľudských práv, 2022, pages 28-33.
33. See ECtHR D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic, Application no. 57325/00, 13 November 2007; Horváth and Kiss v. Hungary, Application no. 11146/11, 29 January 2013. See also the actions taken at EU level: the European Commission initiated infringement procedures against the Czech Republic [INFR(2014)2174] in 2014 and Hungary [INFR(2015)2206] in 2016.
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practices in the field of education for Roma and Traveller children,2024.

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36. CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the Human Rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland, 25 February 2025, paragraphs 37-38.
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39. See also ACFC, Fourth Opinion on Portugal, adopted on 28 June 2019, paragraphs 93-95.
40. ACFC Thematic Commentary No.1 on Education, paragraphs 105-111.
41. Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), Evaluation Report North Macedonia, Third evaluation round, 24 March 2023.
42. Starting with the school year 2024/2025, children aged 4 are legally entitled to a place in kindergarten. This entitlement is scheduled to be extended to children aged 3 from the school year 2025/26. See Eurydice, Slovakia: Ongoing reforms and policy developments, National reforms in early childhood education and care, June 2024.
43. For more information, see the mission and activities of the NGO Cesta von, including the OMAMA Programme: https://cestavon.sk/en/omama/
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46. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Survey on People in Ireland's attitude towards diversity, September 2023.
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48. For more information, see the mission and activities of E-Romnja: https://e-romnja.ro/en/.
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50. See Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)1 and Explanatory Memorandum; ERGO Network, Research report on Roma access to decent and sustainable employment, November 2024; FRA, Roma in 10 European countries. Main results – Roma Survey 2021; FRA, Roma and Travellers in six countries - Survey, 2020.
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52. Roma Foundation for Europe, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth Report, May 2025; ERGO Network, Research report on Roma access to decent and sustainable employment, May 2024.
53. ECSR, Review on Social Rights and the Cost of Living Crisis, p. 54.
54. For more information, see the mission and activities of the Roma Economic Development Initiative: https://redi-ngo.eu/about-redi-2/.
55. For more information, see the mission and activities of Voice of Romni: https://voiceofromni.com.ua/en/.
56. The Pirkanmaa District Court, 29 March 2023, decisions L 758/2022/458 and L 758/2022/455 – upheld by Turku Court of Appeal, 16 January 2025, judgements 31 and 32, Case numbers S 23/729 and S 23/730.
57. See, for example, People in Peril's cooperation activities with private employers. For more information, see the mission and activities of People in Peril: https://clovekvohrozeni.sk/what-we-do/social-integration-programs/.
58. For more information, see the mission and activities of FSG: www.gitanos.org.
59. For more information, see FSG, Acceder Programme: https://www.gitanos.org/que_hacemos/empleo/programa_acceder/.
60. CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights of Roma in Greece, 3 June 2025, paragraph 38.
61. ECRI, General Policy Recommendation No. 11 on Combating racism and racial discrimination in policing, adopted on 29 June 2007; former CoE CommHR, Dunja Mijatović, Ethnic profiling: a persisting practice in Europe, Human Rights Comment, 9 May 2019.
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63. See ECtHR Lingurar v. Romania, Application no. 48474/14, 16 April 2019, paragraphs 76, 80; ECRI, Statement on

racist police abuse, including racial profiling, and systemic racism (adopted at its 82nd plenary meeting, 30 June-2 July 2020); PACE, Resolution 2523 (2023) Institutional racism of law-enforcement authorities against Roma and Travellers, November 2023.

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65. See Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's recommendations to the Helsinki Police Department regarding discriminatory Kuri1 operation against the Roma, 14 May 2024.
66. ECtHR R.R. and R.D. v. Slovakia, Application no. 20649/18, 1 September 2020; .
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69. Sindy Joyce, Olive O'Reilly, Margaret O'Brien, David Joyce, Jennifer Schweppe and Amanda Haynes, Irish Traveller's Access to Justice, European Centre for the Study of Hate, 2022.
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73. See Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, Report on Travellers' Experience of the Justice System, 6 November 2024, citing Irish Prison Service figures of 2017; CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland, 25 February 2025.
74. ERRC in partnership with Fair Trials, Justice denied: Roma in the criminal justice system, March 2022.
75. European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), Report to the Government of North Macedonia, 15 May 2024.
76. ERRC, North Macedonia to Pay Settlement to Families of Roma who Died in Prisons, 12 February 2021, and Victory for Roma: Macedonia Agrees to Pay Compensation for Roma Prison Death, 15 June 2017.
77. See CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights of Roma in Greece, 3 June 2025, paragraph 38.
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82. Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, 45 years of Civil Rights Movement of German Sinti and Roma, 2017.
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84. European Parliament Resolution: International Roma Day – anti-Gypsyism in Europe and EU recognition of the Memorial Day of the Roma genocide during World War II, 15 April 2015.
85. See Council of Europe, Roma history factsheets, Factsheet No. 2.2 Wallachia and Moldavia.
86. See CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flaherty, Memorandum on the human rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland, 25 February 2025; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Ireland), Traveller culture and history research report, February 2023.
87. Bronisława Wajs (1908-1987), commonly known by her Romani name Papusza, was a Polish-Romani classic poet and singer. Ceija Stojka (1933-2013) was an

Austrian writer, artist, singer, activist, and survivor of the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and Bergen-Belsen.

88. For more information, see the mission and activities of ERIAC: https://eriac.org/about-eriac/.
89. See Council of Europe, Roma history factsheets, Factsheet No.6.2 Institutionalisation and Emancipation.
90. See #SUKARIPE: A campaign to combat antigypsyism (Greece). This activity was initiated within the framework of the Joint Programme between the European Union and the Council of Europe 'Equality and Freedom from Discrimination for Roma' (EQUIROM). The programme run until 2024 and focused on preventing and combating antigypsyism and discrimination and promoting equality for Roma people in Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Italy.
91. See Romanikulttuurin museo, Helsinki (Finland).
92. See Council of Europe, the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma, High Level Summit, 20 October 2010; Council of Europe Thematic Action Plan on the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers (2016 - 2019) and Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020 - 2025); a new Council of Europe Strategy for Roma and Traveller inclusion (2026-2030) is to be adopted. See also the Communication from the European Commission to the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'The social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe', April 2010; EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 and the EU Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030. As part of the accession process to the EU, Western Balkan countries committed to align these efforts: in July 2019, the Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process was adopted within the Berlin Process.
93. EU-CoE Joint Programmes include ROMED, JUSTROM, INSCHOOL, ROMACT, ROMACTED, EQUIROM, Roma Integration III and Roma Holocaust Remembrance and Education - RomaMemory. The Council of Europe Roma and Traveller Division is the main implementing actor of these Joint Programmes.
94. See the mission and activities of the European Network on Roma Equality under EU Funds (EURoma) here: https://www.euromanet.eu/
95. See ECtHR, Factsheet – Roma and Travellers, October 2024.
96. See also CoE CommHR, Michael O'Flahterty, Shout-out, 'US aid freeze is leaving a void. Europe must fill it', February 2025.
97. See Roma Civil Monitor (2024) Examples of successful housing desegregation as a precondition of Roma integration. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. Edited by Marek Hojsik.
98. Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), No End in Site; An investigation into the living conditions of children living on a local authority site, May 2021; See also OCO, No End In Site: 2024 Update, October 2024.
99. Commission for the Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, Report on Intersectional and Multiple Discrimination against Roma Women and Girls in Access to Justice, June 2025.
100. CoE CommHR, Partnership with national human rights and equality bodies key to advance common human rights goals, 17 October 2024.
101. See Council of Europe, International Roma Day, 8 April 2025.
102. See United Nations, Universal Values, Principle Two: Leave No One Behind.

My dream for Roma women and girls – both today and for future generations – is that they can live full lives without having to constantly fight to prove their worth.

I dream of a world where a Roma girl can walk into a classroom and be seen as a student with potential. Where she can dream of being a doctor, an artist, a leader – and not have to overcome ten times more just to get half as far.

Where she can open a book and find her history told with dignity, not erased.

I want Roma girls to know that their identity is a source of power, not shame. That they carry a legacy of strength, survival, creativity, and beauty. I want them to grow up in a society that celebrates them, protects them, and gives them space to define themselves – without fear.

Alina Șerban
Romanian Roma actress, filmmaker and ARTivist

There are 12 million Roma and Travellers living in Europe, of whom six million are in the EU. Their voices are strong and clear, especially those of women and girls. They are demanding equal access to rights and opportunities, fighting for justice, advocating for their own rights and the rights of others who have been pushed to the margins of society. They empower, build bridges, and provide support where systems have failed. Together, they are trying to shape a future where everyone belongs.

Yet, their voices often go unheard, excluded from decision-making tables, not respected or acted upon. In far too many places they face vicious hatred and discrimination.

To better support the human rights of Roma and Travellers, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, spent much of 2024 and 2025 travelling across Europe visiting and meeting with them. This book is the story of those encounters. It describes what he saw and heard. The book is also a wake-up call for everyone across the continent to help build a Europe that embraces everyone.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights promotes awareness of and fosters the effective observance of human rights across the organisation's 46 member states. Michael O'Flaherty commenced his six year term in April 2024.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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